

117TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. 613

To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program on dog training therapy and to amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary to provide service dogs to veterans with mental illnesses who do not have mobility impairments.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

MARCH 5, 2021

Mr. TILLIS (for himself, Ms. SINEMA, Mr. CRAMER, and Mrs. FEINSTEIN) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

A BILL

To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program on dog training therapy and to amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary to provide service dogs to veterans with mental illnesses who do not have mobility impairments.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Puppies Assisting
5 Wounded Servicemembers for Veterans Therapy Act” or
6 the “PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act”.

1 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

2 Congress makes the following findings:

3 (1) According to the analyses of veteran suicide
4 published by the Department of Veterans Affairs in
5 August 2016 and titled “Suicide Among Veterans
6 and Other Americans” and in June 2018 and titled
7 “VA National Suicide Data Report”—

8 (A) an average of 20 veterans died by sui-
9 cide each day in 2014;

10 (B) mental health disorders, including
11 major depression and other mood disorders,
12 have been associated with increased risk for sui-
13 cide;

14 (C) since 2001, the proportion of users of
15 health care from the Veterans Health Adminis-
16 tration with mental health conditions or sub-
17 stance use disorders has increased from ap-
18 proximately 27 percent in 2001 to more than
19 40 percent in 2014; and

20 (D) overall, suicide rates are highest
21 among patients with mental health and sub-
22 stance use disorder diagnoses who are in treat-
23 ment and lower among those who received a
24 mental health diagnosis but were not at risk
25 enough to require enhanced care from a mental
26 health provider.

1 (2) The Department of Veterans Affairs must
2 be more effective in its approach to reducing the
3 burden of veteran suicide connected to mental health
4 disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder
5 (in this section referred to as “PTSD”), and new,
6 rigorous scientific research provides persuasive
7 weight to the growing anecdotal evidence that serv-
8 ice dogs ameliorate the symptoms associated with
9 PTSD, and in particular, help prevent veteran sui-
10 cide.

11 (3) Several organizations have proven track
12 records of training service dogs for veterans with se-
13 vere PTSD and dramatically improving the quality
14 of life, ability to re-enter society, and, most impor-
15 tantly, the chances of survival of those veterans.

16 **SEC. 3. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS PILOT PRO-**
17 **GRAM ON DOG TRAINING THERAPY.**

18 (a) IN GENERAL.—Commencing not later than 120
19 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Sec-
20 retary of Veterans Affairs shall carry out a pilot program
21 under which the Secretary shall make grants to one or
22 more appropriate non-government entities for the purpose
23 of assessing the effectiveness of addressing post-deploy-
24 ment mental health and the symptoms of post-traumatic
25 stress disorder (in this section referred to as “PTSD”)

1 through a therapeutic medium of training service dogs for
2 veterans with disabilities.

3 (b) DURATION OF PILOT PROGRAM.—The pilot pro-
4 gram required by subsection (a) shall be carried out dur-
5 ing the five-year period beginning on the date of the com-
6 mencement of the pilot program.

7 (c) CONDITIONS ON RECEIPT OF GRANTS.—As a con-
8 dition of receiving a grant under this section, a non-gov-
9 ernment entity shall—

10 (1) submit to the Secretary certification that
11 the entity is an organization described in section
12 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 and
13 is exempt from taxation under section 501(a) of
14 such code that—

15 (A) provides service dogs to veterans with
16 PTSD; and

17 (B) is accredited by, or adheres to stand-
18 ards comparable to those of, an accrediting or-
19 ganization with demonstrated experience, na-
20 tional scope, and recognized leadership and ex-
21 pertise in the training of service dogs and edu-
22 cation in the use of service dogs;

23 (2) agree to cover all costs in excess of the
24 grant amount;

1 (3) agree to reaccept or replace the service dog
2 the entity provided to a veteran, if necessary, as de-
3 termined by the entity and the veteran;

4 (4) provide a wellness certification from a li-
5 censed veterinarian for any dog participating in the
6 pilot program under this section;

7 (5) employ at least one person with clinical ex-
8 perience related to mental health;

9 (6) ensure that veterans participating in the
10 pilot program receive training from certified service
11 dog training instructors for a period of time deter-
12 mined appropriate by the entity and the Secretary,
13 including service skills to address or alleviate symp-
14 toms unique to the needs of veterans;

15 (7) agree to provide—

16 (A) lectures on service dog training meth-
17 odologies; and

18 (B) practical hands-on training and groom-
19 ing of service dogs;

20 (8) agree that in hiring service dog training in-
21 structors to carry out training under the pilot pro-
22 gram, the entity will give a preference to veterans
23 who have successfully graduated from PTSD or
24 other residential treatment program and who have

1 received adequate certification in service dog train-
2 ing;

3 (9) agree not to use shock collars or prong col-
4 lars as training tools and to use positive reinforce-
5 ment training;

6 (10) agree that upon the conclusion of training
7 provided using the grant funds—

8 (A) the veteran who received the training
9 will keep the dog unless the veteran and the
10 health care provider of the veteran decide it is
11 not in the best interest of the veteran;

12 (B) if the veteran does not opt to own the
13 dog, the entity will be responsible for caring for
14 and appropriately placing the dog;

15 (C) the Department of Veterans Affairs
16 will have no additional responsibility to provide
17 for any benefits under this section; and

18 (D) the Department of Veterans Affairs
19 will have no liability with respect to the dog;

20 (11) provide follow-up support service for the
21 life of the dog, including a contact plan between the
22 veteran and the entity to allow the veteran to reach
23 out for and receive adequate help with the service
24 dog and the entity to communicate with the veteran

1 to ensure the service dog is being properly cared for;
2 and

3 (12) submit to the Secretary an application
4 containing such information, certification, and assur-
5 ances as the Secretary may require.

6 (d) VETERAN ELIGIBILITY.—

7 (1) IN GENERAL.—A veteran is eligible to par-
8 ticipate in the pilot program under this section if the
9 veteran—

10 (A) is enrolled in the patient enrollment
11 system of the Department of Veterans Affairs
12 under section 1705 of title 38, United States
13 Code;

14 (B) has been recommended to participate
15 in the pilot program by a qualified health care
16 provider or clinical team based on the medical
17 judgment that the veteran may potentially ben-
18 efit from participating; and

19 (C) agrees to successfully complete train-
20 ing provided by a non-government entity in re-
21 ceipt of a grant under this section.

22 (2) RELATIONSHIP TO PARTICIPATION IN
23 OTHER PROGRAM.—Veterans may participate in the
24 pilot program under this section in conjunction with

1 the compensated work therapy program of the De-
2 partment of Veterans Affairs.

3 (3) CONTINUING ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENT.—

4 To remain eligible to participate in the pilot pro-
5 gram under this section, a veteran shall see the
6 health care provider or clinical team of the Depart-
7 ment of Veterans Affairs treating the veteran for
8 PTSD not less frequently than once every six
9 months to determine, based on a clinical evaluation
10 of efficacy, whether the veteran continues to benefit
11 from the pilot program.

12 (e) COLLECTION OF DATA.—

13 (1) IN GENERAL.—In carrying out the pilot
14 program under this section, the Secretary shall—

15 (A) develop metrics and other appropriate
16 means to measure, with respect to veterans par-
17 ticipation in the pilot program, the improve-
18 ment in psychosocial function and therapeutic
19 compliance of such veterans and changes with
20 respect to the dependence of such veterans on
21 prescription narcotics and psychotropic medica-
22 tion; and

23 (B) establish processes to document and
24 track the progress of such veterans under the
25 pilot program in terms of the benefits and im-

1 improvements noted as a result of the pilot pro-
2 gram.

3 (2) CONTINUED COLLECTION.—The Secretary
4 shall continue to collect data under paragraph (1)
5 for each veteran who has continued with the dog he
6 or she has personally trained under the pilot pro-
7 gram under this section for a five-year period fol-
8 lowing the date on which the veteran decides to keep
9 the dog.

10 (f) GAO BRIEFING AND REPORT.—

11 (1) BRIEFING.—Not later than one year after
12 the date of the commencement of the pilot program
13 under this section, the Comptroller General of the
14 United States shall brief the Committee on Vet-
15 erans' Affairs of the Senate and the Committee on
16 Veterans' Affairs of the House of Representatives on
17 the methodology established for the pilot program.

18 (2) REPORT.—

19 (A) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 270
20 days after the date on which the pilot program
21 under this section terminates, the Comptroller
22 General shall submit to the Committee on Vet-
23 erans' Affairs of the Senate and the Committee
24 on Veterans' Affairs of the House of Represent-
25 atives a report on the pilot program.

1 (B) ELEMENTS.—The report required by
2 subparagraph (A) shall include an evaluation of
3 the approach and methodology used for the
4 pilot program under this section with respect
5 to—

6 (i) helping veterans with severe PTSD
7 return to civilian life;

8 (ii) relevant metrics, including reduc-
9 tion in scores under the PTSD checklist
10 (PCL-5), improvement in psychosocial
11 function, and therapeutic compliance; and

12 (iii) reducing the dependence of par-
13 ticipants in the pilot program on prescrip-
14 tion narcotics and psychotropic medication.

15 (g) SERVICE DOG TRAINING INSTRUCTOR DE-
16 FINED.—In this section, the term “service dog training
17 instructor” means an instructor who provides the direct
18 training of veterans with PTSD and other post-deploy-
19 ment issues in the art and science of service dog training
20 and handling.

1 **SEC. 4. AUTHORITY OF SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**
2 **TO PROVIDE SERVICE DOGS TO VETERANS**
3 **WITH MENTAL ILLNESSES WHO DO NOT HAVE**
4 **MOBILITY IMPAIRMENTS.**

5 Section 1714 of title 38, United States Code, is
6 amended by adding at the end the following new sub-
7 section:

8 “(e) The Secretary may provide a service dog to a
9 veteran under subsection (c)(3) regardless of whether the
10 veteran has a mobility impairment.”.

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