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The Use of psychiatric Service Dogs in the Treatment of Veterans with PTSD

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14. ABSTRACT . Because of policy changes at the Walter Reed facilities in Ft. Belvoir, the Bethesda facility and the Naval base at Portsmouth, the project as designed can no longer be conducted. The research team has had opportunities to present the project has been provided opportunities to further develop the theory behind the concept of using service dogs to reduce the symptoms of PTSD among returning soldiers with severe cases of the disability. At this point the study is being redesigned to address implementation of the model in the community.					
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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	Page 4.
Human Subjects Review Activities	Page 5.
Presentations and Publicity.....	Page 5.
Staffing Adjustments.....	Page 5.
Appendix 1 Service Dog Functions for Persons With PTSD.....	Page 6.

INTRODUCTION

The original proposed project was designed to study the effectiveness of service dogs in the reduction of PTSD symptoms among soldiers, Sailors and Marines returning to the Portsmouth Medical Facility from Iraq and Afghanistan. The Psychiatric Service Dog Society (PSDS) has been developing the concept of using service dogs with a variety of mental health disabilities, including PTSD for the past 13 years. In a 2005 survey of Psychiatric Service Dog (PSD) handlers, 82% of the respondents with PTSD who are using a PSD reported a decline in symptom manifestation. That finding among others and the strong interest of veterans and returning soldiers, the PSD launched a listserv community for veterans of all wars who are interested in using a service dog to help reduce refractory symptoms of PTSD. The community grows on a continuing basis and after 1 year has grown beyond 150 subscribers who are actually using service dogs.

The funded research project would have been the first direct test of the effectiveness of service dogs for returning warriors who are suffering from PTSD. It is a “seedling” study that will engage only 20 soldiers. They will be randomly assigned to two groups one receiving the service dog and training to handle it and the second will not receive such support until the end of the project. The measures will include behavioral assessments of general mental health and PTSD symptom manifestations as well as the biological markers that are associated with anxiety, stress and depression. The parallel measures will strengthen the study and add power to the analyses. Once the data collection is complete, and if the findings are positive, there will be a need for a larger study examining the effects of PSDs on PTSD. The study is being administered and data collected by an independent party, the lead agency, Westat.

After over two years of attempting to implement the study at Walter Reed and other military sites, the intent is now to modify the project in order to learn more about the use of service dogs by returning soldiers and veterans. The decision to not allow our study to continue was made by the occupational therapists. The research review committee kept insisting on minor changes to our protocol and even began to have us undo changes made in earlier versions of the protocol. We now plan to do a survey of returning soldiers and veterans who are using service dogs. It will be a replication of an earlier survey.

HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW ACTIVITIES

We will have to submit a new protocol to the Walter Reed research review committee and the Army research review committee. This will be completed once the Westat IRB approves the protocol.

PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLICITY

Presentations:

The Psychiatric Service Dog self-training model was presented in Colorado with support from the local training and support communities. Soldiers from the local bases and veterans attended. The model was well received.

Publicity:

1. Drs. Love and Esnayra have been re- interviewed by a New York Times reporter who is very interested in the project and some of the legal and political issues that have arisen in the course of advancing the use of service dogs for soldiers suffering from PTSD. We have not been apprised of any publication date. One of the key documents discussed is provided in Appendix I.

STAFFING ADJUSTMENTS

The key project staff have not changed since the last report.. Dr. Love (Project PI) and Dr. Esnayra (Project Co-PI) are involved in redesigning the stgudy.

APPENDIX 1

Service Dog Functions for Persons With PTSD

PSD Assistance for persons with PTSD

Symptom(s): assistive behaviors	assistance classification
reclusiveness: canine accompanies veteran outside the home	physical task
night terrors: dog wakes veteran (optional: turn on light)	physical task
startle reaction: canine-defined personal space perimeter	physical task
forgetfulness: canine medication reminder	physical task
dissociative fugue: 'take me home' command	physical task
hypervigilance: search a room for the presence of humans	physical task
neurochemical imbalance: Team walks to stimulate endorphin production	physical task
dissociative flashback: tactile stimulation mediates sensory re-integration and orientation to time/place	physical task
alert to presence of others (i.e., 'pop a corner' or 'watch my back')	work--leveraging a dog's natural senses
dissociative spell: canine interrupts	work--mind/body
emotional regulation: canine as therapeutic distraction	work--mind/body
sensory overload: canine as alternate focus	work--mind/body
social withdrawal: canine-facilitated interpersonal interaction	work--community integration
canine alert to emotional escalation	work-- leveraging a dog's natural senses (CBT)
hypervigilance: canine environmental threat assessment	work--leveraging a dog's natural senses (CBT)

hallucinations: canine-facilitated reality testing	work--leveraging a dog's natural senses (CBT)
suicidal ideation: 'suicide prevention dog'	work—(CBT)