

115TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. _____

To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to make grants to eligible organizations to provide service dogs to veterans with severe post-traumatic stress disorder, and for other purposes.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

Mrs. FISCHER (for herself and Mr. BOOKER) introduced the following bill;
which was read twice and referred to the Committee on

A BILL

To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to make grants to eligible organizations to provide service dogs to veterans with severe post-traumatic stress disorder, and for other purposes.

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 Act of 2017” or the “PAWS
6 Act of 2017”.

1 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS; SENSE OF CONGRESS.**

2 (a) FINDINGS.—Congress makes the following find-
3 ings:

4 (1) According to the analysis of veteran suicide
5 published by the Department of Veterans Affairs in
6 August 2016 and titled “Suicide Among Veterans
7 and Other Americans”—

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 the Veterans Health Administration with men-
16 tal health conditions or substance use disorders
17 has increased from approximately 27 percent in
18 2001 to more than 40 percent in 2014; and

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

1 (2) Pairing a service dog with a veteran costs
2 approximately \$25,000, including with respect to
3 training of the service dog as well as training of the
4 veteran with the service dog.

5 (b) SENSE OF CONGRESS.—It is the sense of Con-
6 gress that the Department of Veterans Affairs must be
7 more effective in its approach to reducing the burden of
8 veteran suicide connected to mental health disorders, in-
9 cluding post-traumatic stress disorder, and a pilot pro-
10 gram and study to assess the benefits of pairing service
11 dogs with veterans suffering from mental health disorders
12 would allow the Department to better determine the effi-
13 cacy of using service dogs as a nontraditional therapy to
14 ensure the well-being of veterans.

15 **SEC. 3. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS PILOT PRO-**
16 **GRAM TO AWARD GRANTS FOR THE PROVI-**
17 **SION OF SERVICE DOGS TO CERTAIN VET-**
18 **ERANS WITH SEVERE POST-TRAUMATIC**
19 **STRESS DISORDER.**

20 (a) GRANTS.—The Secretary of Veterans Affairs
21 shall carry out a pilot program under which the Secretary
22 awards a grant in the amount of \$25,000 to eligible orga-
23 nizations for each eligible veteran referred to that organi-
24 zation for a service dog pairing.

25 (b) BENEFITS PROVIDED.—

1 (1) IN GENERAL.—An organization that re-
2 ceives a grant under subsection (a) shall provide the
3 following for each service dog and veteran partici-
4 pating in the pilot program:

5 (A) Coverage of a commercially available
6 veterinary health insurance policy to maintain
7 the health of the dog and keep the dog func-
8 tioning in the prescribed role for the life of the
9 dog.

10 (B) Hardware, or repairs or replacements
11 for hardware, that are clinically determined to
12 be required by the dog to perform the tasks
13 necessary to assist the veteran with the diag-
14 nosed disorder of the veteran.

15 (C) Payments for travel expenses for the
16 veteran to obtain the dog, calculated in the
17 same manner as similar travel expenses pro-
18 vided pursuant to section 111 of title 38,
19 United States Code.

20 (2) OTHER TRAVEL EXPENSES.—If a veteran is
21 required to replace a service dog provided pursuant
22 to a grant under this section, the Secretary shall pay
23 for the travel expenses described in paragraph
24 (1)(C) required to obtain a new service dog pursuant
25 to subsection (c)(3), regardless of any other benefits

1 the veteran is receiving for the first service dog
2 under this section.

3 (c) ELIGIBLE ORGANIZATIONS.—To be eligible to re-
4 ceive a grant under this section, an organization shall—

5 (1) be a nonprofit organization that provides
6 trained service dogs—

7 (A) that—

8 (i) is certified by Assistance Dogs
9 International;

10 (ii) on average, provides one-on-one
11 training for each service dog and recipient
12 for 30 hours or more during a period of 90
13 days or more;

14 (iii) provides a wellness verification
15 from a licensed veterinarian for each serv-
16 ice dog;

17 (iv) provides an in-house residential
18 facility, or other accommodations nearby,
19 in which service dog recipients stay for a
20 minimum of 10 days while receiving not
21 less than 30 hours of training with their
22 new service dog;

23 (v) ensures all service dogs pass the
24 American Kennel Club Community Canine
25 test and the Assistance Dogs International

1 Public Access Test prior to permanent
2 placement with a recipient; and

3 (vi) provides follow-up support service
4 for the life of the service dog, to include a
5 contact plan between the veteran and orga-
6 nization to allow—

7 (I) the veteran to reach out for
8 and receive adequate help with the
9 service dog; and

10 (II) the organization to commu-
11 nicate with the veteran to ensure that
12 the service dog is receiving proper
13 care; or

14 (B) that meets the service dog agency
15 standards established by the Association of
16 Service Dog Providers for Military Veterans
17 that cater to the unique needs of veterans with
18 post-traumatic stress disorder;

19 (2) agree to cover all costs in excess of the
20 grant amount to guarantee the benefits listed under
21 subsection (b)(1);

22 (3) agree to reaccept or replace a service dog
23 provided by the organization to a veteran, if nec-
24 essary, as determined by the veteran and the organi-
25 zation; and

1 (4) submit to the Secretary an application con-
2 taining such information, certification, and assur-
3 ances as the Secretary may require.

4 (d) ELIGIBLE VETERANS.—

5 (1) APPROVAL AND REFERRAL.—

6 (A) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of Vet-
7 erans Affairs shall review and approve veterans
8 eligible to participate under this section and
9 shall refer approved veterans to eligible organi-
10 zations.

11 (B) APPROVAL DETERMINATION.—The pe-
12 riod beginning on the date on which a veteran
13 applies to participate under this section and the
14 date on which the Secretary makes an approval
15 determination may not exceed 90 days.

16 (2) INITIAL ELIGIBILITY.—For purposes of this
17 section, an eligible veteran is a veteran—

18 (A) who is enrolled in the system of annual
19 patient enrollment of the Department of Vet-
20 erans Affairs established and operated under
21 section 1705 of title 38, United States Code;

22 (B) who has been treated and has com-
23 pleted an established evidence-based treatment
24 for post-traumatic stress disorder yet remains
25 diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder

1 by a qualified health care provider as rated on
2 the post-traumatic stress disorder checklist
3 (PCL-5);

4 (C) with respect to whom the health care
5 provider or clinical team of the Department of
6 Veterans Affairs that is treating the veteran for
7 such disorder determines based upon medical
8 judgment that the veteran may potentially ben-
9 efit from a service dog; and

10 (D) who agrees to successfully complete
11 training provided by an eligible organization
12 pursuant to subsection (c).

13 (3) ONGOING ELIGIBILITY.—To remain eligible
14 to participate in the pilot program under this sec-
15 tion, a veteran shall see the health care provider or
16 clinical team of the Department of Veterans Affairs
17 treating the veteran for post-traumatic stress dis-
18 order at least once every 180 days to determine,
19 based on a clinical evaluation of efficacy, whether
20 the veteran continues to benefit from a service dog.

21 (4) OTHER CASES.—If at any point the veteran
22 is no longer able or willing to care for the service
23 dog, the veteran and the organization that provided
24 the service dog to the veteran shall determine the

1 appropriate recourse to ensure the safety of both the
2 veteran and the service dog.

3 (e) RELATIONSHIP TO DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS
4 AFFAIRS BENEFITS.—The provision of a service dog to
5 a veteran under this section is in addition to any other
6 hospital care or medical service furnished by the Depart-
7 ment for that veteran for post-traumatic stress disorder,
8 and an improvement in symptoms as a result of the provi-
9 sion of a service dog shall not affect the eligibility of the
10 veteran for any other benefit under the laws administered
11 by the Secretary.

12 (f) METRICS.—In carrying out this section, the Sec-
13 retary shall—

14 (1) develop metrics and other appropriate
15 means to measure, with respect to veterans partici-
16 pating in the pilot program, the improvement in psy-
17 chosocial function and therapeutic compliance of
18 such veterans and changes with respect to the de-
19 pendence on prescription narcotics and psychotropic
20 medication of such veterans; and

21 (2) establish processes to document and track
22 the progress of such veterans under the pilot pro-
23 gram in terms of the benefits and improvements
24 noted as a result of the pilot program.

1 (g) COMPTROLLER GENERAL BRIEFING AND RE-
2 PORT.—

3 (1) BRIEFING.—Not later than one year after
4 the date on which the Secretary commences the pilot
5 program under subsection (a), the Comptroller Gen-
6 eral of the United States shall provide to the Com-
7 mittee on Veterans' Affairs of the Senate and the
8 Committee on Veterans' Affairs of the House of
9 Representatives a briefing on the methodology estab-
10 lished for the pilot program.

11 (2) REPORT.—

12 (A) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 270
13 days after the date on which the pilot program
14 terminates, the Comptroller General shall sub-
15 mit to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs of
16 the Senate and the Committee on Veterans' Af-
17 fairs of the House of Representatives a report
18 on the pilot program.

19 (B) ELEMENTS.—The report required
20 under subparagraph (A) shall include an eval-
21 uation of the approach and methodology used
22 for the pilot program with respect to—

23 (i) helping veterans with severe post-
24 traumatic stress disorder return to civilian
25 life;

1 (ii) relevant metrics, such as reduction
2 in scores under the post-traumatic stress
3 disorder checklist (PCL-5), improvement
4 in psychosocial function, and therapeutic
5 compliance; and

6 (iii) reducing the dependence of par-
7 ticipants in the pilot program on prescrip-
8 tion narcotics and psychotropic medication.

9 (h) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—There is
10 authorized to be appropriated for the period of fiscal year
11 2018 through fiscal year 2023, \$10,000,000 to carry out
12 the pilot program under this section.

13 (i) OFFSET.—The amounts otherwise authorized to
14 be appropriated for the Office of Human Resources and
15 Administration of the Department of Veterans Affairs for
16 the period of fiscal year 2018 through fiscal year 2023
17 shall be reduced by \$10,000,000.

18 (j) TERMINATION.—

19 (1) IN GENERAL.—The authority to carry out
20 the pilot program under this section shall terminate
21 on the date that is five years after the date of the
22 enactment of this Act.

23 (2) POSSESSION OF SERVICE DOG.—An eligible
24 veteran in possession of a service dog furnished
25 under the pilot program as of the termination of the

1 pilot program may keep the service dog after the
2 termination of the pilot program for the life of the
3 dog.