

117TH 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 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 2021” or the “PAWS
6 Act of 2021”.

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 November 2020 entitled “VA National Veteran Sui-
7 cide Prevention Annual Report”—

8 (A) an average of 17.6 veterans died by
9 suicide each day in 2018;

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) nearly 60 percent of veterans who re-
15 ceived care from the Veterans Health Adminis-
16 tration and died by suicide in 2018 had a men-
17 tal health or substance use disorder diagnosis
18 within the two-year period preceding their
19 death; and

20 (D) in 2018, patients of the Veterans
21 Health Administration with a mental health or
22 substance abuse disorder diagnosis had a sui-
23 cide rate of 57.2 patients per 100,000, com-
24 pared to a suicide rate of 58.6 patients per
25 100,000 in 2005.

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 (3) New, rigorous scientific research provides
6 persuasive weight to the growing anecdotal evidence
7 that service dogs ameliorate the symptoms associ-
8 ated with post-traumatic stress disorder, and in par-
9 ticular, help prevent veteran suicide.

10 (4) According to the results of a recent study
11 by the Veterans Health Administration, veterans
12 paired with service dogs over an 18-month period ex-
13 perienced a 3.7 percent improvement on the post-
14 traumatic stress disorder checklist (PCL-5) and also
15 saw a decrease in depression and suicidal measures.

16 (b) SENSE OF CONGRESS.—It is the sense of Con-
17 gress that the Department of Veterans Affairs must be
18 more effective in its approach to reducing the burden of
19 veteran suicide connected to mental health disorders, in-
20 cluding post-traumatic stress disorder, and should use all
21 tools at its disposal, including innovative treatments such
22 as pairing service dogs with veterans suffering from men-
23 tal health disorders.

1 **SEC. 3. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS PROGRAM TO**
2 **AWARD GRANTS FOR THE PROVISION OF**
3 **SERVICE DOGS TO CERTAIN VETERANS WITH**
4 **SEVERE POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DIS-**
5 **ORDER.**

6 (a) GRANTS.—

7 (1) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of Veterans
8 Affairs shall carry out a program under which the
9 Secretary awards grants to eligible organizations for
10 eligible veterans referred to that organization for a
11 service dog pairing.

12 (2) LIMITATION.—The amount of the grant for
13 each eligible veteran referred to an eligible organiza-
14 tion under paragraph (1) shall not to exceed
15 \$25,000.

16 (b) BENEFITS PROVIDED.—

17 (1) IN GENERAL.—An organization that re-
18 ceives a grant under subsection (a) shall provide the
19 following for each service dog and veteran partici-
20 pating in the program under this section:

21 (A) Coverage of a commercially available
22 veterinary health insurance policy to maintain
23 the health of the dog and keep the dog func-
24 tioning in the prescribed role for the life of the
25 dog.

1 (B) Hardware, or repairs or replacements
2 for hardware, that are clinically determined to
3 be required by the dog to perform the tasks
4 necessary to assist the veteran with the diag-
5 nosed disorder of the veteran.

6 (C) Payment for travel expenses for the
7 veteran to obtain the dog, calculated in the
8 same manner as similar travel expenses pro-
9 vided pursuant to section 111 of title 38,
10 United States Code.

11 (2) OTHER TRAVEL EXPENSES.—If a veteran is
12 required to replace a service dog provided pursuant
13 to a grant under this section, the Secretary shall pay
14 for the travel expenses described in paragraph
15 (1)(C) required to obtain a new service dog pursuant
16 to subsection (c)(3), regardless of any other benefits
17 the veteran is receiving for the first service dog
18 under this section.

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

21 (1) be a nonprofit organization that—

22 (A)(i) is accredited by Assistance Dogs
23 International, the International Guide Dog Fed-
24 eration, or another similar widely recognized ac-
25 creditation organization that the Secretary de-

1 termines has accreditation standards that meet
2 or exceed the standards of Assistance Dogs
3 International and the International Guide Dog
4 Federation; or

5 (ii) meets the publicly available standards
6 of the Association of Service Dog Providers for
7 Military Veterans; and

8 (B) has expertise in the unique needs of
9 veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder;

10 (2) agree to cover all costs in excess of the
11 grant amount to guarantee the benefits listed under
12 subsection (b)(1);

13 (3) agree to reaccept or replace a service dog
14 provided by the organization to a veteran, if nec-
15 essary, as determined by the veteran and the organi-
16 zation; and

17 (4) submit to the Secretary an application con-
18 taining such information, certification, and assur-
19 ances as the Secretary may require.

20 (d) ELIGIBLE VETERANS.—

21 (1) APPROVAL AND REFERRAL.—

22 (A) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of Vet-
23 erans Affairs shall review and approve veterans
24 eligible to participate under this section and

1 shall refer approved veterans to eligible organi-
2 zations.

3 (B) APPROVAL DETERMINATION.—The pe-
4 riod beginning on the date on which a veteran
5 applies to participate under this section and the
6 date on which the Secretary makes an approval
7 determination may not exceed 90 days.

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

10 (A) who is enrolled in the system of annual
11 patient enrollment of the Department of Vet-
12 erans Affairs established and operated under
13 section 1705(a) of title 38, United States Code;

14 (B) who has been treated and has com-
15 pleted an established evidence-based treatment
16 for post-traumatic stress disorder yet remains
17 diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder
18 by a qualified health care provider as rated on
19 the post-traumatic stress disorder checklist
20 (PCL-5);

21 (C) with respect to whom the health care
22 provider or clinical team of the Department
23 that is treating the veteran for such disorder
24 determines based upon medical judgment that

1 the veteran may potentially benefit from a serv-
2 ice dog; and

3 (D) who agrees to successfully complete
4 training provided by an eligible organization.

5 (3) ONGOING ELIGIBILITY.—To remain eligible
6 to participate in the program under this section, a
7 veteran shall see the health care provider or clinical
8 team of the Department treating the veteran for
9 post-traumatic stress disorder at least once every
10 180 days to determine, based on a clinical evaluation
11 of efficacy, whether the veteran continues to benefit
12 from a service dog.

13 (4) OTHER CASES.—If at any point the veteran
14 is no longer able or willing to care for the service
15 dog, the veteran and the organization that provided
16 the service dog to the veteran shall determine the
17 appropriate recourse to ensure the safety of both the
18 veteran and the service dog.

19 (e) POSSESSION OF SERVICE DOG.—Except if deter-
20 mined otherwise under subsection (d)(4), an eligible vet-
21 eran in possession of a service dog furnished under the
22 program under this section may elect to keep the service
23 dog for the life of the dog, regardless of the continued
24 participation of the veteran in the program.

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

10 (g) METRICS.—In carrying out this section, the Sec-
11 retary shall—

12 (1) develop metrics and other appropriate
13 means to measure, with respect to veterans partici-
14 pating in the program under this section, the im-
15 provement in psychosocial function and therapeutic
16 compliance of such veterans and changes with re-
17 spect to the dependence on prescription narcotics
18 and psychotropic medication of such veterans; and

19 (2) establish processes to document and track
20 the progress of such veterans under the program in
21 terms of the benefits and improvements noted as a
22 result of the program.

23 (h) COMPTROLLER GENERAL BRIEFING AND RE-
24 PORT.—

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

9 (2) REPORT.—

10 (A) IN GENERAL.—Not later than three
11 years after providing the briefing under para-
12 graph (1), the Comptroller General shall submit
13 to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs of the
14 Senate and the Committee on Veterans' Affairs
15 of the House of Representatives a report on the
16 program under this section.

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

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

24 (ii) relevant metrics, such as reduction
25 in scores under the post-traumatic stress

1 disorder checklist (PCL-5), improvement
2 in psychosocial function, and therapeutic
3 compliance; and

4 (iii) reducing the dependence of par-
5 ticipants in the program on prescription
6 narcotics and psychotropic medication.

7 (i) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—There is
8 authorized to be appropriated for the period of fiscal year
9 2022 through fiscal year 2024, \$10,000,000 to carry out
10 the program under this section.