

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 17, 2021

The Honorable Denis McDonough
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

We write to you about the important issue of assisting our nation's veterans who are suffering from mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). We know this is a priority of your Department and, therefore urge you to swiftly implement the Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers (PAWS) Act after it has passed Congress.

It is clear that veterans suffering from mental health disorders are at an increased risk for suicide. According to the Department's National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, published in November 2020, among veterans with recent Veterans Health Administration (VHA) care who died by suicide in 2018, nearly 60% of them had a mental health or substance use disorder diagnosis, which often co-occurs with PTSD, within a two-year period preceding their death. The report also found that an average of 17.6 veterans died by suicide each day in 2018.

The Department of Veteran Affairs and Congress have worked hard to meet this challenge; however, an average rate of 17.6 veteran suicides per day tragically demonstrates that too many of our nation's heroes are being lost and that new and innovative approaches to address this issue are needed.

One of the reasons that we were proud to support your confirmation to be the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, was that you recognized the need to ensure that the VA is not "limited by outdated tools and practices" and that "our veterans deserve the best we as a nation have to offer."¹ It is this innovative thinking that will help us to better understand the needs of our veterans suffering from mental illness and provide a pathway to address these needs to improve their quality of life and prevent deaths.

An innovative approach that we have advocated for during the past several Congresses to address suicide among veterans is to pair veterans suffering from PTSD with service dogs. The PAWS Act, would establish a three year program within the VA in which the Department would provide grants to eligible service dog organizations in order to pair veterans, who have received treatment for PTSD but remain symptomatic according to the PCL-5 checklist, with their own service dog. The legislation would provide a direct avenue through the VA to pair veterans suffering from PTSD with services dogs, while also ensuring there is a robust network of providers to meet the need of our veterans across the country.

¹ <https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2020/12/22/my-pledge-to-our-nations-veterans/>

In recent years, multiple studies have shown the benefit of utilizing service dogs to lower the symptoms of PTSD among veterans. We were pleased that earlier this year, the VHA released the first results from a long-awaited study, "A Randomized Trial of Differential Effectiveness of Service Dog Pairing Versus Emotional Support Dog Pairing to Improve Quality of Life for Veterans with PTSD". While this study did not directly accomplish the congressional intent of conducting a study to measure efficacy of services dogs as a treatment, as required by the fiscal year 2010 National Defense Authorization Act, we were excited to see that even with limitations on the study design veterans paired with service dogs experienced improvements on the PTSD checklist (PCL-5) and had fewer suicidal behaviors and ideations, particularly at 18 months post- pairing. Unfortunately, as you know, the ability for veterans to access a service dog to assist with their PTSD through the VA is extremely limited. While traditional treatments for mental health and PTSD will always play an important role, we are leaving a powerful tool unused.

We believe that these results show that service dogs do assist veteran's suffering from PTSD and that the enactment of the PAWS Act would bring much needed help to our nation's heroes.

We believe that the PAWS Act would be in line with your pledge to make sure that the VA is not limited by outdated tools and practices and promise to fight like hell for our veterans and we hope that we can work together to ensure that the PAWS Act is enacted and successfully implemented to do just that.

We look forward to working with you on these important efforts to assist our nation's heroes who have sacrificed so much for our country.

Sincerely,



Deb Fischer
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator