

# HOUSE COMMITTEE ON **VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

REPUBLICANS | RANKING MEMBER MIKE BOST

## **H.R. 1448: The Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers (PAWS) for Veterans Therapy Act**

### **Background:**

Despite significant increases to funding, staffing, programs, and attention for suicide prevention and mental health among those who have served since the late 1990's, approximately 20 veterans, active-duty servicemembers, and never Federally activated members of the National Guard and Reserve die by suicide every day. To prevent suicide – including among those who may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) - the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) must provide both traditional mental health therapies and safe, promising new approaches to caring for at-risk veterans. There is widespread support and growing scientific evidence suggesting that service dogs are one such approach. Research conducted by Kaiser Permanente and Purdue University has found that working with service dogs helped alleviate PTSD symptoms, leading to better interpersonal relationships, a lower risk of substance abuse, and overall better mental and physical health. Those findings are consistent with the results of a study released by VA in January 2021, which concluded that veterans who were paired with a service dog experienced a reduction in the severity of their PTSD symptoms and had fewer suicidal behaviors and ideations. This research is consistent with the experiences of servicemembers and veterans who have gone through service dog training therapy programs at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and the Palo Alto VA Medical Center and reported improved mental health and a reduction in their PTSD symptoms as a result.

The PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act would expand on those longstanding pilot programs and build on the research regarding the benefit of pairing veterans with PTSD with well-trained service dogs. Veterans participating in the program would work with accredited guide and service dog organizations and be paired with qualified service dog training instructors for the duration of the program. Upon completion of the program, if the veteran and the veteran's provider agree that it is in the veteran's best interest, the veteran would be able to adopt the service dog they have been paired with. This bipartisan bill has more than 300 cosponsors and passed the House with widespread support in 2020.

### **The Message:**

- A growing body of evidence has proven that an appropriately trained service dog can be life-saving for veterans with PTSD.
- VA's own research has found that veterans participants paired with a service dog experienced reduced PTSD symptoms and had fewer suicidal behaviors
- The PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act would expand successful, safe pilot programs to help at-risk veterans heal through service dog training therapy.