

114TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

H. R. 359

To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program on dog training therapy.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

JANUARY 14, 2015

Mr. STIVERS (for himself and Mr. WALZ) introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

A BILL

To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program on dog training therapy.

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 “Veterans Dog Training
5 Therapy Act”.

6 **SEC. 2. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS PILOT PRO-**
7 **GRAM ON DOG TRAINING THERAPY.**

8 (a) IN GENERAL.—Commencing not later than 120
9 days after the date of the enactment of the Act, the Sec-
10 retary of Veterans Affairs shall carry out a pilot program

1 under which the Secretary shall enter into a contract with
2 one or more appropriate non-government entities for the
3 purpose of assessing the effectiveness of addressing post-
4 deployment mental health and post-traumatic stress dis-
5 order symptoms through a therapeutic medium of training
6 service dogs for veterans with disabilities.

7 (b) DURATION OF PILOT PROGRAM.—The pilot pro-
8 gram required by subsection (a) shall be carried out dur-
9 ing the five-year period beginning on the date of the com-
10 mencement of the pilot program.

11 (c) LOCATIONS OF PILOT PROGRAM.—In entering
12 into contracts for purposes of the pilot program, the Sec-
13 retary shall seek to enter into contracts with appropriate
14 non-government entities located in close proximity to at
15 least three but not more than five medical centers of the
16 Department.

17 (d) APPROPRIATE NON-GOVERNMENT ENTITIES.—
18 For purposes of the pilot program, an appropriate non-
19 government entity is an entity that is certified in the train-
20 ing and handling of service dogs and that has a training
21 area that would be appropriate for use in educating vet-
22 erans with mental health conditions in the art and science
23 of service dog training and handling. Such training area
24 shall—

1 (1) include a dedicated space that is suitable
2 for grooming and training dogs indoors;

3 (2) be wheelchair accessible;

4 (3) include classroom or lecture space;

5 (4) include office space for staff;

6 (5) include a suitable space for storing training
7 equipment;

8 (6) provide for periodic use of other training
9 areas for training the dogs with wheelchairs and
10 conducting other exercises;

11 (7) include outdoor exercise and toileting space
12 for dogs; and

13 (8) provide transportation for weekly field trips
14 to train dogs in other environments.

15 (e) DESIGN OF PILOT PROGRAM.—Each contract en-
16 tered into under subsection (a) shall provide that the non-
17 government entity shall—

18 (1) ensure that veterans participating in the
19 program receive training from certified service dog
20 training instructors;

21 (2) ensure that in selecting assistance dogs for
22 use in the program, dogs residing in animal shelters
23 or foster homes are looked at as an option, if appro-
24 priate, and ensure that all dogs used in the program
25 have adequate temperament and health clearances;

1 (3) ensure that each service dog in training
2 participating in the pilot program is taught all es-
3 sential commands pertaining to service dog skills;

4 (4) ensure that each service dog in training
5 lives at the pilot program site or a volunteer foster
6 home in the vicinity of such site while receiving
7 training;

8 (5) ensure that the pilot program involves both
9 lecture of service dog training methodologies and
10 practical hands-on training and grooming of service
11 dogs; and

12 (6) ensure that the pilot program is designed
13 to—

14 (A) maximize the therapeutic benefits to
15 veterans participating in the program; and

16 (B) provide well-trained service dogs to
17 veterans with disabilities; and

18 (7) in hiring service dog training instructors to
19 carry out training under the pilot program, give a
20 preference to veterans who have successfully grad-
21 uated from post-traumatic stress disorder or other
22 residential treatment programs and who have re-
23 ceived adequate certification in service dog training.

1 (f) ADMINISTRATION.—In order to carry out the pilot
2 program under section (a), the Secretary of Veterans Af-
3 fairs shall—

4 (1) administer the program through the Recre-
5 ation Therapy Service of the Department of Vet-
6 erans Affairs under the direction of a certified rec-
7 reational therapist with sufficient administrative ex-
8 perience to oversee the pilot program; and

9 (2) establish a director of service dog training
10 with a background working in social services, experi-
11 ence in teaching others to train service dogs in a vo-
12 cational setting, and at least one year of experience
13 working with veterans or active duty service mem-
14 bers with post-traumatic stress disorder in a clinical
15 setting.

16 (g) VETERAN ELIGIBILITY.—The Secretary shall se-
17 lect veterans for participation in the pilot program. A vet-
18 eran with post-traumatic stress disorder or other post-de-
19 ployment mental health condition may volunteer to partici-
20 pate in the pilot program, if the Secretary determines that
21 there are adequate program resources available for such
22 veteran at the pilot program site. Veterans may partici-
23 pate in the pilot program in conjunction with the com-
24 pensated work therapy program of the Department of Vet-
25 erans Affairs.

1 (h) COLLECTION OF DATA.—The Secretary shall col-
2 lect data on the pilot program required under subsection
3 (a) to determine how effective the program is for the vet-
4 erans participating in the program. Such data shall in-
5 clude data to determine how effectively the program as-
6 sists veterans in—

7 (1) reducing stigma associated with post-trau-
8 matic stress disorder or other post-deployment men-
9 tal health condition;

10 (2) improving emotional regulation;

11 (3) improving patience;

12 (4) instilling or re-establishing a sense of pur-
13 pose;

14 (5) providing an opportunity to help fellow vet-
15 erans;

16 (6) reintegrating into the community;

17 (7) exposing the dog to new environments and
18 in doing so, helping the veteran reduce social isola-
19 tion and withdrawal;

20 (8) building relationship skills, including par-
21 enting skills;

22 (9) relaxing the hyper-vigilant survival state;

23 (10) improving sleep patterns; and

24 (11) enabling veterans to decrease the use of
25 pain medication.

1 (i) REPORTS TO CONGRESS.—Not later than one year
2 after the date of the commencement of the pilot program
3 under subsection (a), and each year thereafter for the du-
4 ration of the pilot program, the Secretary shall submit to
5 Congress a report on the pilot program. Each such report
6 shall include—

7 (1) the number of veterans participating in the
8 pilot program;

9 (2) a description of the services carried out
10 under the pilot program;

11 (3) the effects that participating in the pilot
12 program has on the following—

13 (A) symptoms of post-traumatic stress dis-
14 order and post-deployment adjustment difficul-
15 ties, including depression, maintenance of sobri-
16 ety, suicidal ideations, and homelessness;

17 (B) potentially relevant physiological mark-
18 ers that possibly relate to the interactions with
19 the service dogs;

20 (C) family dynamics;

21 (D) insomnia and pain management; and

22 (E) overall well-being; and

23 (4) the recommendations of the Secretary with
24 respect to the extension or expansion of the pilot
25 program.

1 (j) DEFINITION.—For the purposes of this section,
2 the term “service dog training instructor” means an in-
3 structor who provides the direct training of veterans with
4 post-traumatic stress disorder and other post-deployment
5 issues in the art and science of service dog training and
6 handling.

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