

Pairing Veterans and Shelter Dogs: A Review of Two Different Program Models

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A Little About You

- What country are you from?
- What is your profession?
- Do you have experience working with veterans or people who have been diagnosed with PTSD?



Background

- Of the two million people deployed since 2001, 20-30% will suffer from PTSD or other psychiatric disorders.
- Every day, 22 veterans commit suicide in the U.S.
- No single service can “fix” this
 - Community life reentry is complex
 - Practical, physical, social, and other factors limit treatment access and engagement



Presentation Aims



- Describe two different human-animal interaction (HAI) program models pairing people with PTSD (primarily veterans) with dogs
- Examine similarities and differences in approaches
- Explore preliminary evaluation findings
- Discuss preliminary takeaways and opportunities to strengthen HAI programs



Soldier's Best Friend (SBF)



- Nonprofit based in Phoenix, AZ
- Trains veterans to live and become a team with a former AZ shelter dog. Dogs perform services that ameliorate PTSD symptoms.
- Private and group sessions 1-2 days/week for up to 30 weeks + 1 session every other week up to 6 additional months (roughly 12-month program)
- Program graduates serve as mentors for veterans entering the program



SBF Preliminary Findings*



- Renewed sense of purpose in life
- Increased sense of social support, expanded network of social connections

*"Well he has filled a void in my life....
He's a dog but he's more like a partner.
So when it comes time for me
needing something or having to do
something...he looks up at me like
don't worry, it's okay we can do this."*



* Based on 14 interviews (45-min each) with veterans in the SBF program; additional interview with veterans participating in similar programs corroborated noted themes



SBF Preliminary Findings

- Improved relationships with family/friends

"[My dog] is like an additional drug that got added that keeps me calmer and has allowed me to go out in public more. Where normally I just didn't like being out...Now I can do things like just going to the store, going with my wife. Before she'd go by herself, but now I accompany her."

- Sense of security



SBF Preliminary Findings

- Motivation to make a better life (for self & dog)

"That's my car over there...and I wish we had a bigger car because we want to take her everywhere and that's kind of like why we're moving too...We're saving up for a bigger car because being able to have her with me is.... It's helpful to me."



SBF Preliminary Findings

- Desire to give back

"I'm going to become a big advocate for service animals and for people who have them. I think there should be a decal on vehicles showing there's a service animal so if something happens they're going to look for the animal, too. And they'll know not to separate us if say I'm in an accident because the first thing I'm going to be asking is - Where's my dog?"



Veterans Advancing the Lives Of Rescues (VALOR)



- Safe Humane Chicago program
- Groups of five veterans socialize and train shelter dogs involved in abuse/neglect court cases
- 8-week program, 2 2-hour sessions/week
- Designed to build self-efficacy and self-esteem; teach dog training [potential employment] skills; provide social support



Veterans Advancing the Lives Of Rescues (VALOR)



VALOR Preliminary Findings



- Second chances (dogs and veterans)

"The dogs are angels. It's hard to believe they were abused. I expected a lot of mean dogs that were out of control, but found the sweetest dogs I'd ever met. Helping train dogs that have been abused helps me because they've been through a lot like I have they still have faith and that's what I'm looking for. It gives me hope."



VALOR Preliminary Findings

- Prosocial connectedness, decreased isolation

"The people were genuine and kind. The dogs' love made you feel great. It was sort of like kids. It reminds me of my feeling with my daughter....I have a caregiver in me. When I can't give care, I might as well get drunk. I need a mission."



VALOR Preliminary Findings

- Self-efficacy, sense of accomplishment

"It made me feel good about myself. I did something positive in these dogs' lives. I did something to make their adoption happen."



VALOR Preliminary Findings

- Calming effect (being there for the dog)

"I'm in a calm, relaxed mode when I'm working with the dogs. The dog can feel how you feel. If you're frustrated the dog knows it. It changed me. It opened my eyes to how much a dog can relax me...One look in their eyes and I know I need to be straight for them."



VALOR Preliminary Findings

- Motivation

"After the program I had less suicidal thoughts. I had more hope for the future. I spend less time on the (suicide) hotline. The program gives you something to look forward to."



VALOR Preliminary Findings

- Self-confidence, self-worth

"I have been struggling with suicide and trying to find self-worth. Since I started to work at the shelter I feel worthy. It's hard to believe the dogs have been abused. Helping them overcome that has improved my sense of self-worth."



VALOR: Lessons Learned and Issues to Consider

Orientation

- Written protocol for all program participants
- Get information about participants' comfort level with different types of dogs
- Identify triggers
- Be sensitive to issues re: physical contact, punctuality



VALOR: Lessons Learned and Issues to Consider

Program Model and Process

- Important to integrate case managers
- Protocol for addressing comments made by participants (“hanging on by a thread”)
- Get feedback at end of each session
- Consider boundaries!
- Graduation is really important



VALOR: Lessons Learned and Issues to Consider

The Dogs

- Safety is paramount
- Selection of dogs: Consider consistency so participants feel they have contributed when dog goes to rescue/is adopted
- Tell each dog’s story!
- Debrief about feelings re: Animal Care & Control (not all happy endings)



Program Model Comparisons

Similarities

- ✓ Community-based
- ✓ Involve shelter dogs
- ✓ Human and animal partners have specific interactive tasks
- ✓ Include some degree of social support, interaction with other humans
- ✓ Focus on reciprocal relationships

Differences

- ☐ Program goals (for people and dogs)
- ☐ Selection criteria
- ☐ Duration of HAI
- ☐ Intensity of HAI
- ☐ One-on-one vs. group interactions



Key Takeaways



- HAI may address the emotional numbing and intense stress felt by people who have PTSD
- HAI may assist veterans to engage and heal (intra- and interpersonal relationships/interactions)
- Shelter dogs are a viable alternative to dogs bred and raised for service
- HAI can catalyze partnerships among people and organizations with [previously un-] shared goals



Questions to Consider



- What HAI approaches and/or dose are optimal for reaching social and behavioral objectives for veterans and others with PTSD?
- What core set of measures (human, animal, organizational) can be used to track delivery and impact of HAI programs for veterans?
- To what extent do the benefits of HAI persist over time, particularly for veterans who do not adopt a dog?
- What are the economic benefits of HAI involving shelter (in contrast to purebred) dogs as partners?



Contact Information

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