

116TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. 2949

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

NOVEMBER 21, 2019

Mrs. FISCHER (for herself, Mr. BOOKER, Mr. TILLIS, Ms. MCSALLY, Mr. BROWN, Mr. CORNYN, Mr. MENENDEZ, Ms. WARREN, and Mr. RUBIO) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

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 2019” or the “PAWS
6 Act of 2019”.

1 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS; SENSE OF CONGRESS.**

2 (a) FINDINGS.—Congress makes the following find-
3 ings:

4 (1) According to the analyses of veteran suicide
5 published by the Department of Veterans Affairs in
6 August 2016 entitled “Suicide Among Veterans and
7 Other Americans” and in June 2018 entitled “VA
8 National Suicide Data Report”—

9 (A) an average of 20 veterans died by sui-
10 cide each day in 2014;

11 (B) mental health disorders, including
12 major depression and other mood disorders,
13 have been associated with increased risk for sui-
14 cide;

15 (C) since 2001, the proportion of users of
16 the Veterans Health Administration with men-
17 tal health conditions or substance use disorders
18 has increased from approximately 27 percent in
19 2001 to more than 40 percent in 2014; and

20 (D) overall, suicide rates are highest
21 among patients with mental health and sub-
22 stance use disorder diagnoses who are in treat-
23 ment and lower among those who received a
24 mental health diagnosis but were not at risk
25 enough to require enhanced care from a mental
26 health provider.

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 (b) SENSE OF CONGRESS.—It is the sense of Con-
11 gress that the Department of Veterans Affairs must be
12 more effective in its approach to reducing the burden of
13 veteran suicide connected to mental health disorders, in-
14 cluding post-traumatic stress disorder, and a program and
15 study to assess the benefits of pairing service dogs with
16 veterans suffering from mental health disorders would
17 allow the Department to better determine the efficacy of
18 using service dogs as a nontraditional therapy to ensure
19 the well-being of veterans.

20 **SEC. 3. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS PROGRAM TO**
21 **AWARD GRANTS FOR THE PROVISION OF**
22 **SERVICE DOGS TO CERTAIN VETERANS WITH**
23 **SEVERE POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DIS-**
24 **ORDER.**

25 (a) GRANTS.—

1 (1) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of Veterans
2 Affairs shall carry out a program under which the
3 Secretary awards grants to eligible organizations for
4 eligible veterans referred to that organization for a
5 service dog pairing.

6 (2) LIMITATION.—The amount of the grant for
7 each eligible veteran referred to an eligible organiza-
8 tion under paragraph (1) shall not to exceed
9 \$25,000.

10 (b) BENEFITS PROVIDED.—

11 (1) IN GENERAL.—An organization that re-
12 ceives a grant under subsection (a) shall provide the
13 following for each service dog and veteran partici-
14 pating in the program:

15 (A) Coverage of a commercially available
16 veterinary health insurance policy to maintain
17 the health of the dog and keep the dog func-
18 tioning in the prescribed role for the life of the
19 dog.

20 (B) Hardware, or repairs or replacements
21 for hardware, that are clinically determined to
22 be required by the dog to perform the tasks
23 necessary to assist the veteran with the diag-
24 nosed disorder of the veteran.

1 (C) Payments for travel expenses for the
2 veteran to obtain the dog, calculated in the
3 same manner as similar travel expenses pro-
4 vided pursuant to section 111 of title 38,
5 United States Code.

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

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

16 (1) be a nonprofit organization that—

17 (A) provides service dogs to veterans with
18 post-traumatic stress disorder;

19 (B) meets the publicly available national
20 standards for service dog providers as set forth
21 by the Association of Service Dog Providers for
22 Military Veterans; and

23 (C) has expertise in the unique needs of
24 veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder;

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

4 (3) agree to reaccept or replace a service dog
5 provided by the organization to a veteran, if nec-
6 essary, as determined by the veteran and the organi-
7 zation; and

8 (4) submit to the Secretary an application con-
9 taining such information, certification, and assur-
10 ances as the Secretary may require.

11 (d) ELIGIBLE VETERANS.—

12 (1) APPROVAL AND REFERRAL.—

13 (A) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of Vet-
14 erans Affairs shall review and approve veterans
15 eligible to participate under this section and
16 shall refer approved veterans to eligible organi-
17 zations.

18 (B) APPROVAL DETERMINATION.—The pe-
19 riod beginning on the date on which a veteran
20 applies to participate under this section and the
21 date on which the Secretary makes an approval
22 determination may not exceed 90 days.

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

1 (A) who is enrolled in the system of annual
2 patient enrollment of the Department of Vet-
3 erans Affairs established and operated under
4 section 1705 of title 38, United States Code;

5 (B) who has been treated and has com-
6 pleted an established evidence-based treatment
7 for post-traumatic stress disorder yet remains
8 diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder
9 by a qualified health care provider as rated on
10 the post-traumatic stress disorder checklist
11 (PCL-5);

12 (C) with respect to whom the health care
13 provider or clinical team of the Department of
14 Veterans Affairs that is treating the veteran for
15 such disorder determines based upon medical
16 judgment that the veteran may potentially ben-
17 efit from a service dog; and

18 (D) who agrees to successfully complete
19 training provided by an eligible organization
20 pursuant to subsection (c).

21 (3) ONGOING ELIGIBILITY.—To remain eligible
22 to participate in the program under this section, a
23 veteran shall see the health care provider or clinical
24 team of the Department of Veterans Affairs treating
25 the veteran for post-traumatic stress disorder at

1 least once every 180 days to determine, based on a
2 clinical evaluation of efficacy, whether the veteran
3 continues to benefit from a service dog.

4 (4) OTHER CASES.—If at any point the veteran
5 is no longer able or willing to care for the service
6 dog, the veteran and the organization that provided
7 the service dog to the veteran shall determine the
8 appropriate recourse to ensure the safety of both the
9 veteran and the service dog.

10 (e) POSSESSION OF SERVICE DOG.—Except if deter-
11 mined otherwise under subsection (d)(4), an eligible vet-
12 eran in possession of a service dog furnished under the
13 program may elect to keep the service dog for the life of
14 the dog, regardless of the continued participation of the
15 veteran in the program.

16 (f) RELATIONSHIP TO DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS
17 AFFAIRS BENEFITS.—The provision of a service dog to
18 a veteran under this section is in addition to any other
19 hospital care or medical service furnished by the Depart-
20 ment for that veteran for post-traumatic stress disorder,
21 and an improvement in symptoms as a result of the provi-
22 sion of a service dog shall not affect the eligibility of the
23 veteran for any other benefit under the laws administered
24 by the Secretary.

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

- 3 (1) develop metrics and other appropriate
4 means to measure, with respect to veterans partici-
5 pating in the program, the improvement in psycho-
6 social function and therapeutic compliance of such
7 veterans and changes with respect to the dependence
8 on prescription narcotics and psychotropic medica-
9 tion of such veterans; and
- 10 (2) establish processes to document and track
11 the progress of such veterans under the program in
12 terms of the benefits and improvements noted as a
13 result of the program.

14 (h) COMPTROLLER GENERAL BRIEFING AND RE-
15 PORT.—

- 16 (1) BRIEFING.—Not later than one year after
17 the date on which the Secretary commences the pro-
18 gram under subsection (a), the Comptroller General
19 of the United States shall provide to the Committee
20 on Veterans' Affairs of the Senate and the Com-
21 mittee on Veterans' Affairs of the House of Rep-
22 resentatives a briefing on the methodology estab-
23 lished for the program.

24 (2) REPORT.—

1 (A) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 3 years
2 after providing the briefing under paragraph
3 (1), the Comptroller General shall submit to the
4 Committee on Veterans' Affairs of the Senate
5 and the Committee on Veterans' Affairs of the
6 House of Representatives a report on the pro-
7 gram.

8 (B) ELEMENTS.—The report required
9 under subparagraph (A) shall include an eval-
10 uation of the approach and methodology used
11 for the program with respect to—

12 (i) helping veterans with severe post-
13 traumatic stress disorder return to civilian
14 life;

15 (ii) relevant metrics, such as reduction
16 in scores under the post-traumatic stress
17 disorder checklist (PCL-5), improvement
18 in psychosocial function, and therapeutic
19 compliance; and

20 (iii) reducing the dependence of par-
21 ticipants in the program on prescription
22 narcotics and psychotropic medication.

23 (i) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—There is
24 authorized to be appropriated for the period of fiscal year

- 1 2020 through fiscal year 2022, \$10,000,000 to carry out
- 2 the program under this section.

