

Testimony to ACVA 28 May 2021 from Dr Susan Brock, Registered Clinical Psychologist

From the perspective of a clinician who has spent the last 25 years working specifically with Veterans with PTSD the benefits of the Audeamus program over other service dog programs are the following:

- Screening by mental health professional for readiness for a service dog and input from the treating professional in collaboration with the Veteran as to what the primary needs (pre-learning requirements) of the Veteran are and what specific goals the service dog is going to meet.
- Pairing of the Veteran with a service dog that is going to be able to be trained to meet those needs. This is an important aspect of the pairing as frequently the Veterans may want a specific breed of dog that is not conducive to their mental health needs and this is part of the up-front education process that takes place prior to commitment.
- Team training is in my opinion one of the most critical and therapeutic parts of the program. By the Veteran being given the task of training their puppy (with team support), it fosters the bond between them and provides a sense of purpose and a focus outside of themselves. This is something that is second nature to them as Veterans – team before self - and is such an important part of their recovery. When an individual is experiencing debilitating psychological pain, it is very difficult to self-motivate to engage in activities, which although have the potential to move them out of the pain, feel incredibly anxiety-provoking and overwhelming. However, when the motivation is doing what is necessary for your service animal, whom you have been tasked with caring for and training, it becomes easier.
- In addition, the team training that is provided emphasizes the importance of bond and connection and of regulating and recovery exercises for both the Veteran and their dog. One of the most profound injuries associated with military trauma is the loss of trust. Loss of trust in others and loss of trust in self. This is manifest in an inability to be emotionally close to others and a profound sense of disconnect from the world. A service dog provides a bridge for the rebuilding of trust. As they build the bond of trust with their dog, they are able to gradually take risks around connecting with people. The training process introduces this aspect of recovery right from the start with the Veterans primary mental health caregiver being involved and team training being done in small groups of 4-6 other veterans over the first year of training. Veterans are encouraged to stay connected to the other members of their group between training sessions and to reach out for support from team leaders or other group members whenever needed.
- The program also continues to provide information to the Veteran's primary mental health caregiver in regard to how the dog can provide support particularly in session to regulate and recover when engaging in trauma focused treatment. Further, in the early stages of team training the Veteran's mental health professional can provide important information in regard to how they feel that the pairing is progressing and to identify any concerns that may have come up in their sessions with the Veteran. This again reinforces the team approach such that the Veteran feels supported on multiple levels.

- Finally, as a clinician who has worked with Veterans with service dogs for many years now, I can attest to the difference it makes when they have had training specific to the Veterans needs versus simply having obedience training. When they have a dog that is being trained or is trained to assist them in managing their PTSD, I can utilize that to assist the Veteran in working through painful memories and to manage intense emotions. Further, as I have a trained therapy dog in my office, when Veterans don't have a service dog, my dog takes on this role and in doing so allows them to have some insight and experience into how a service dog could support them in their recovery.