

Veterans, mental health, and the service dog connection

Operation Service Dog has provided over \$2-million to help train and pair over 61 veterans with service dogs, with 27 more on the way.



Standard poodle Caliber, left, is a service dog paired with retired CAF veteran Kenda Doody, centre. German shepherd service dog Cora, right, is paired with retired RCMP veteran Ed Brake. *Photos courtesy of Fire Team K9 Service Dogs*

[OPINION](#) | BY Nujma Bond | November 11, 2024

The Royal Canadian Legion has long been advocating for government-led national training standards for service dogs—amazing animals that provide a lifeline for Canadian Armed Forces and Royal Canadian Mounted Police veterans living with operational stress injuries such as post traumatic stress disorder, or physical injury.

Canada still doesn't have any such standards. Why does it matter? It's summarized in the words of one retired RCMP veteran, Ed Brake. A former staff sergeant and head of the RCMP's police motorcycle unit in Ottawa, Brake has lived with a German shepherd service dog named Cora for about two years. Cora was trained through a program recognized by Wounded Warriors Canada (WWC).

“I’ve already seen the benefits of having a true certified service dog,” he explains. Not only because of the support they provide, but also “because there’s a ton of fakes, and it makes a difference.” He also says legitimate dogs are regularly questioned—and it can be an uncomfortable experience.

It’s not that there has been an overt lack of willingness to develop national guidelines in Canada. The federal government took on this task and was close to getting there as far back as 2018, but the effort ended rather abruptly and has seemingly been abandoned. The reason? The legion learned it was too difficult to reach a consensus among affected parties, including well-meaning yet disparate groups that run training programs.

If fulsome national consultations have occurred, surely an expert panel can be convened, a plan developed, and standards put in place in relatively short order. Not everyone will agree, but common sense must prevail. Canada already has national standards and regulations for many things that affect health and well-being.

Upholding standards and providing related ID-cards would make it much easier for the general public to recognize a certified service animal. It would assist airlines, eating establishments, workplaces, and others. It could also help make it possible for organizations including the legion—and possibly Veterans Affairs Canada—to direct funding to veterans for the costly feeding and caring of dogs; knowing the animals and their owners have accredited training, and the dogs are considered an official treatment element.

Currently, the legion’s Ontario Command leads a program called Operation Service Dog, and through its collaboration with WWC, has provided over \$2-million to help train and pair over 61 veterans with service dogs, with 27 more on the way. The legion’s Quebec Command is set to begin a similar relationship. Because WWC developed a set of standards, they could potentially be applied across the country today—pending modifications that might be needed. The framework exists and has been tested.

Caliber—fondly known as Callie—is a standard poodle, a service dog paired with now-retired CAF veteran Kenda Doody two years ago after a suggestion from a health-care provider. They became a “team” last November. A former combat veteran, Doody describes the relationship this way: “[Callie] has been making me ‘soft’ again,” she says, having become ‘hard,’ unapproachable, angry, and isolated after living through traumatic experiences while serving in the forces.

These animals can provide reassurance, reduce anxiety, and make a more “normal” life possible—literally taking some veterans from their basements back into society. Our country needs to take action to make it easier for our veterans to receive and maintain a qualified service dog as part of their treatment plan.

Here’s a three-step plan to consider:

- Create national standards for service dogs for veterans (and for the wider public in tandem while we’re at it), recognizing dogs as a regulated option in the treatment mix for veterans;
- Provide financial support to help veterans maintain the health of their dogs where required, through a simple easy to follow process; and
- Implement new regulations swiftly having received agreement on any required synergies with all provinces and territories.

In the words of RCMP veteran Brake: “My life has been changed since I received Cora.” And from CAF veteran Doody about Callie: “I have to take care of her because she takes care of me ... she’s like my child, but with fur.” Enough said.

The Royal Canadian Legion asks for tangible action—not in two years, five years, 10 years, or after countless new reports. With willingness and a concerted collective effort, including by the Legion, this could happen pretty quickly. Let’s just get it done.

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