

This ABLE Veteran

Your Pups Can Give War Veterans a Second Chance at Life

by Jan Owen

Approved by the Editorial Review Board



More than 600,000 American veterans of recent wars suffer from psychological trauma because of their military service. An estimated 22 veterans commit suicide every day. The uniquely trained service dog can give these men and women a chance to truly come home.

Providing such dogs – at no cost to the veteran – is the mission of This ABLE Veteran (TAV). Based in Carbondale, IL, TAV is the only veteran-centric organization that trains dogs for the veteran's specialized needs. TAV's pioneering program also involves the therapist and family in the veteran's recovery from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBIs), related conditions, and/or mobility issues.

"As a team, we dedicated ourselves to learning from Veterans Administration clinicians about PTSD and the culture of brotherhood that the military instills," said Behesha Doan, TAV founder, president and training director. "The insight we gained has allowed us to better prepare dogs to assist them."

Doan, a professional trainer with nearly 25 years experience, assembled experienced trainers and community support for TAV's specialized program. Trainers teach the dogs to recognize and alert the veteran to the physical signs of anxiety, interrupting it in the earliest stages. The TAV team also teaches the veterans to be confident leaders for their dogs and to understand the world through the dog's eyes.

"PTSD and related conditions leave a person feeling isolated and beyond the reach of help," Doan said. "The affection and bond that veterans develop with their dogs open the way toward recovery and balance."

She explained that TAV helps the veteran and the dog develop into a team. Doing so makes it easier for them to walk through the difficult steps with their family and their clinician to carry out a long-term plan for reclaiming their lives. The dog training starts with

standard service dog skills, but that's just the foundation for training one handpicked dog to aid one particular veteran with specific issues.

"This unique model of care has proven to work where traditional therapies and less specialized dog programs haven't been enough," she said.

Finding dogs with the "right stuff"

In the fall of 2011, TAV selected the first veteran applicants and six dogs, including Golden Retrievers. In August of 2012, almost a year and 1,000 hours of training later, the veterans and dogs met. Following several weeks of training the veteran and dog teams, TAV celebrated their first graduating class.

As the program gains momentum, TAV continuously receives new applications from veterans and clinicians. A major challenge remains: finding more dogs with the "right stuff" of genetic soundness, good temperament, confidence, and trainability.

TAV describes dogs that are bred for service work as possessing low reactivity to stimuli (not too much prey drive). They have no sound sensitivity or resource-guarding tendencies in their line and are naturally cooperative with humans. Their learning starts early in puppyhood so they do not spend their formative months rehearsing bad behaviors. They are of sound structure and temperament, come from healthy stock, and are free of problematic allergies or other health conditions.

Rescue dogs comprise only a small percentage of dogs in the program. TAV's trainers found that most, while excellent pets, don't have the qualities needed for such demanding work. In order to optimize the time, effort, and expense invested in training, TAV seeks good

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"If you are an experienced breeder who produces genetically sound dogs with the desired service dog characteristics, please contact us. You can help our veterans recover from their unseen wounds and come home again to those who love them." – Behesha Doan, TAV founder, president and training director



Behesha Doan,
TAV President and Training Director, founded the organization in 2011. She is the owner of Extreme K-9 and has nearly 25 years experience training dogs for law enforcement, search and rescue, service dogs, and pets.

quality puppies from reputable breeders.

"These veterans need a strong, focused, intuitive canine partner in every environment," Doan said. "We've learned to stack the deck in favor of the veterans by starting with dogs bred for the work."

Requesting help from breeders

After talking with GRCA members at the 2012 National Specialty at Purina Farms in St. Louis, MO, Doan was impressed with the number of breeders who are perpetuating lines of multi-purpose Golden Retrievers, including service dogs.

"I realize that great breeders have great demand for their puppies," Doan said. "Yet those are the puppies that are most likely to succeed as a veteran's specialized service dog, or as the sires and dams of future service dogs."

"Having my service dog in my life is like a calming oasis in an otherwise anxiety-ridden existence. There is a truth to life here with him I can't find anywhere else."

– Kevin, veteran and TAV program graduate

One of TAV's goals is to establish a breeding program to ensure selection of the most appropriate service dog for each individual veteran's needs. Having a reliable source of dogs with the most suitable characteristics flattens the learning curve, maximizes training efforts, and shortens wait time for veterans.

Meanwhile, TAV relies on good breeders to provide puppies for their training program.

How TAV Chooses Puppies Puppy Testing

The puppies from selectively bred litters should be tested at the age of eight weeks to gauge aptitude for service work. Comprehensive puppy tests, such as C.A.R.A.T., designed by Suzanne Clothier, are particularly useful to compare all the puppies in a litter against a broad spectrum of traits. Such tests produce a profile of each puppy's strengths in one snapshot of time. Taken in conjunction with the breeder's observations of the litter, the test can expose potential problems early. The "tester" should be someone the puppies have never seen before, and the test may be administered by anyone properly trained in the testing protocol. Ideally, these puppy tests should be recorded and the videos made available for the TAV trainers to review.

Sire & Dam Considerations

- The sires and dams themselves should exemplify the qualities of temperament and character desired in their offspring.
- Selectively bred puppies from solid genetics dramatically reduce the risk of fully trained service dogs failing due to common health issues. The following Golden Retriever clearances are needed to manage risk:
 - PennHip X-rays and/or OFA Hip certifications
 - OFA Elbow Clearances
 - OFA Cardiac Clearances (ideally by a board certified veterinary cardiologist)
 - Eye exams by board certified veterinary ophthalmologists participating in the CERF (now OFA) program
 - DNA Testing for PRA (Progressive Retinal Atrophy)

Why TAV? Will our puppies be in good hands?

Breeders who may offer puppies to TAV likewise have questions about the care and welfare of pups that might be accepted to the program. Where do they go? Who raises them? How are they trained?

Selected puppies go to Carbondale, IL, where they are raised and trained by TAV's training staff in their own homes.

The core team of professional dog trainers consists of about a dozen men and women with decades of combined experience! They are graduates of TAV's PTSD Service Dog Academy. An experienced veterinarian provides routine care and is available 24 hours a day in case of an emergency.

The dogs' training starts with a verbal marker system, house training, socialization, developing eye contact, motivational obedience training, and learning to ignore distractions. As training progresses, the dogs learn to open/close doors/drawers, retrieve objects, brace for balance and/or pull wheel chairs (age permitting), turn lights on/off, and recognize and alert to anxiety responses.

Additional individualized skills needed by a particular veteran are incorporated with more advanced training. Successful dogs are placed with their veteran at 12 to 18 months of age. TAV follows up with the dog and veteran monthly for the first year and quarterly thereafter.

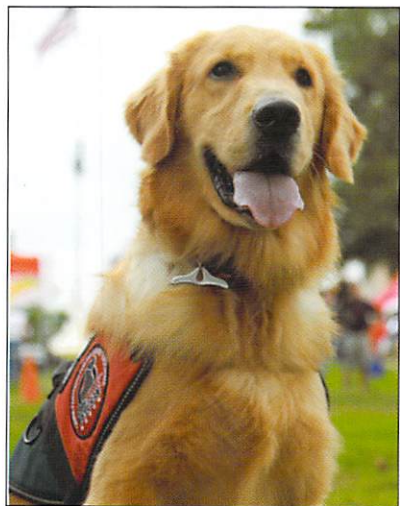
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In the fall of 2011, TAV-trained Teddy became the nation's first canine staff member in a VA residential rehabilitation treatment facility in Marion, IL. He is able to serve 20 residents in the poly-traumatic clinic that focuses on treatment for PTSD/TBI, addictions and situational homelessness. This pilot program is a model for potential integration to other VA facilities.