

117TH CONGRESS  
1ST SESSION

# S. 951

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.

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## IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

MARCH 24, 2021

Mrs. FISCHER (for herself, Mr. BOOKER, Ms. CORTEZ MASTO, Mr. MENENDEZ, Mr. SCOTT of Florida, Ms. ROSEN, Mr. RUBIO, Ms. WARREN, and Mr. CORNYN) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

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## 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 2021” or the “PAWS  
6 Act of 2021”.

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

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

4 (1) According to the analysis of veteran suicide  
5 published by the Department of Veterans Affairs in  
6 November 2020 entitled “VA National Veteran Sui-  
7 cide Prevention Annual Report”—

8 (A) an average of 17.6 veterans died by  
9 suicide each day in 2018;

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

14 (C) nearly 60 percent of veterans who re-  
15 ceived care from the Veterans Health Adminis-  
16 tration and died by suicide in 2018 had a men-  
17 tal health or substance use disorder diagnosis  
18 within the two-year period preceding their  
19 death; and

20 (D) in 2018, patients of the Veterans  
21 Health Administration with a mental health or  
22 substance abuse disorder diagnosis had a sui-  
23 cide rate of 57.2 patients per 100,000, com-  
24 pared to a suicide rate of 58.6 patients per  
25 100,000 in 2005.

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          (4) According to the results of a recent study  
11          by the Veterans Health Administration, veterans  
12          paired with service dogs over an 18-month period ex-  
13          perienced a 3.7 percent improvement on the post-  
14          traumatic stress disorder checklist (PCL-5) and also  
15          saw a decrease in depression and suicidal measures.

16          (b) SENSE OF CONGRESS.—It is the sense of Con-  
17          gress that the Department of Veterans Affairs must be  
18          more effective in its approach to reducing the burden of  
19          veteran suicide connected to mental health disorders, in-  
20          cluding post-traumatic stress disorder, and should use all  
21          tools at its disposal, including innovative treatments such  
22          as pairing service dogs with veterans suffering from men-  
23          tal health disorders.

1 **SEC. 3. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS PROGRAM TO**  
2 **AWARD GRANTS FOR THE PROVISION OF**  
3 **SERVICE DOGS TO CERTAIN VETERANS WITH**  
4 **SEVERE POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DIS-**  
5 **ORDER.**

6 (a) GRANTS.—

7 (1) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of Veterans  
8 Affairs shall carry out a program under which the  
9 Secretary awards grants to eligible organizations for  
10 eligible veterans referred to that organization for a  
11 service dog pairing.

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

15 (b) BENEFITS PROVIDED.—

16 (1) IN GENERAL.—An organization that re-  
17 ceives a grant under subsection (a) shall provide the  
18 following for each service dog and veteran partici-  
19 pating in the program under this section:

20 (A) Coverage of a commercially available  
21 veterinary health insurance policy to maintain  
22 the health of the dog and keep the dog func-  
23 tioning in the prescribed role for the life of the  
24 dog.

25 (B) Hardware, or repairs or replacements  
26 for hardware, that are clinically determined to

1 be required by the dog to perform the tasks  
2 necessary to assist the veteran with the diag-  
3 nosed disorder of the veteran.

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

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

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

19 (1) be a nonprofit organization that—

20 (A)(i) is accredited by Assistance Dogs  
21 International, the International Guide Dog Fed-  
22 eration, or another similar widely recognized ac-  
23 creditation organization that the Secretary de-  
24 termines has accreditation standards that meet  
25 or exceed the standards of Assistance Dogs

1 International and the International Guide Dog  
2 Federation; or

3 (ii) meets the publicly available standards  
4 of the Association of Service Dog Providers for  
5 Military Veterans; and

6 (B) has expertise in the unique needs of  
7 veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder;

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

11 (3) agree to reaccept or replace a service dog  
12 provided by the organization to a veteran, if nec-  
13 essary, as determined by the veteran and the organi-  
14 zation; and

15 (4) submit to the Secretary an application con-  
16 taining such information, certification, and assur-  
17 ances as the Secretary may require.

18 (d) ELIGIBLE VETERANS.—

19 (1) APPROVAL AND REFERRAL.—

20 (A) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of Vet-  
21 erans Affairs shall review and approve veterans  
22 eligible to participate under this section and  
23 shall refer approved veterans to eligible organi-  
24 zations.

1           (B) APPROVAL DETERMINATION.—The pe-  
2           riod beginning on the date on which a veteran  
3           applies to participate under this section and the  
4           date on which the Secretary makes an approval  
5           determination may not exceed 90 days.

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

8                   (A) who is enrolled in the system of annual  
9                   patient enrollment of the Department of Vet-  
10                   erans Affairs established and operated under  
11                   section 1705(a) of title 38, United States Code;

12                   (B) who has been treated and has com-  
13                   pleted an established evidence-based treatment  
14                   for post-traumatic stress disorder yet remains  
15                   diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder  
16                   by a qualified health care provider as rated on  
17                   the post-traumatic stress disorder checklist  
18                   (PCL-5);

19                   (C) with respect to whom the health care  
20                   provider or clinical team of the Department  
21                   that is treating the veteran for such disorder  
22                   determines based upon medical judgment that  
23                   the veteran may potentially benefit from a serv-  
24                   ice dog; and

1 (D) who agrees to successfully complete  
2 training provided by an eligible organization.

3 (3) ONGOING ELIGIBILITY.—To remain eligible  
4 to participate in the program under this section, a  
5 veteran shall see the health care provider or clinical  
6 team of the Department treating the veteran for  
7 post-traumatic stress disorder at least once every  
8 180 days to determine, based on a clinical evaluation  
9 of efficacy, whether the veteran continues to benefit  
10 from a service dog.

11 (4) OTHER CASES.—If at any point the veteran  
12 is no longer able or willing to care for the service  
13 dog, the veteran and the organization that provided  
14 the service dog to the veteran shall determine the  
15 appropriate recourse to ensure the safety of both the  
16 veteran and the service dog.

17 (e) POSSESSION OF SERVICE DOG.—Except if deter-  
18 mined otherwise under subsection (d)(4), an eligible vet-  
19 eran in possession of a service dog furnished under the  
20 program under this section may elect to keep the service  
21 dog for the life of the dog, regardless of the continued  
22 participation of the veteran in the program.

23 (f) RELATIONSHIP TO DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS  
24 AFFAIRS BENEFITS.—The provision of a service dog to  
25 a veteran under this section is in addition to any other



1 hospital care or medical service furnished by the Depart-  
2 ment for that veteran for post-traumatic stress disorder,  
3 and an improvement in symptoms as a result of the provi-  
4 sion of a service dog shall not affect the eligibility of the  
5 veteran for any other benefit under the laws administered  
6 by the Secretary.

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

9 (1) develop metrics and other appropriate  
10 means to measure, with respect to veterans partici-  
11 pating in the program under this section, the im-  
12 provement in psychosocial function and therapeutic  
13 compliance of such veterans and changes with re-  
14 spect to the dependence on prescription narcotics  
15 and psychotropic medication of such veterans; and

16 (2) establish processes to document and track  
17 the progress of such veterans under the program in  
18 terms of the benefits and improvements noted as a  
19 result of the program.

20 (h) COMPTROLLER GENERAL BRIEFING AND RE-  
21 PORT.—

22 (1) BRIEFING.—Not later than one year after  
23 the date on which the Secretary commences the pro-  
24 gram under subsection (a), the Comptroller General  
25 of the United States shall provide to the Committee

1 on Veterans' Affairs of the Senate and the Com-  
2 mittee on Veterans' Affairs of the House of Rep-  
3 resentatives a briefing on the methodology estab-  
4 lished for the program.

5 (2) REPORT.—

6 (A) IN GENERAL.—Not later than three  
7 years after providing the briefing under para-  
8 graph (1), the Comptroller General shall submit  
9 to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs of the  
10 Senate and the Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
11 of the House of Representatives a report on the  
12 program under this section.

13 (B) ELEMENTS.—The report required  
14 under subparagraph (A) shall include an eval-  
15 uation of the approach and methodology used  
16 for the program with respect to—

17 (i) helping veterans with severe post-  
18 traumatic stress disorder return to civilian  
19 life;

20 (ii) relevant metrics, such as reduction  
21 in scores under the post-traumatic stress  
22 disorder checklist (PCL-5), improvement  
23 in psychosocial function, and therapeutic  
24 compliance; and

1                   (iii) reducing the dependence of par-  
2                   ticipants in the program on prescription  
3                   narcotics and psychotropic medication.

4           (i) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—There is  
5 authorized to be appropriated for the period of fiscal year  
6 2022 through fiscal year 2024, \$10,000,000 to carry out  
7 the program under this section.

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