

Can Service Dogs Improve Activity and Quality of Life in Veterans with PTSD?' Study Chair - Gabrielle H. Saunders

The goal of this study is to determine whether provision of a PTSD service dog to Veterans with PTSD is effective at improving activity (limitations) and quality of life, relative to provision of an emotional support dog. PTSD service dogs are assistance dogs trained to perform tasks that specifically address disabilities associated with PTSD. For example the dogs are trained to '*block*' and '*behind*' - stand in front/behind the handler to give him/her space, '*lights*' – turn on the lights in a dark room, and '*sweep*' – check the perimeter of a room and turn on lights if necessary. Emotional support dogs are not taught specific tasks to address disabilities associated with PTSD, however they may help the handler by providing companionship and support. The study is a 3-site randomized clinical trial (Atlanta VA Medical Center, Iowa City VA Health Care System, VA Portland Health Care System), that is jointly funded by VA RR&D and CSP (Perry Point). Two hundred twenty Veterans with PTSD as defined using the Clinician Administered PTSD Scale will be enrolled. All will undergo baseline assessment of activity limitations, PTSD symptoms, quality of life, healthcare utilization, employment and productivity, depression, and suicidal intent. They will then be randomly assigned to receive a Service Dog or Emotional Support Dog. Following an observation period of 3-6 months they will be paired with their dog and then will undergo further assessments (home-based and clinic based) over the next 18 months. The primary analyses will be conducted to determine whether participants who receive Service Dogs have decreased activity limitations and improved quality of life over time, as compared to participants who receive an Emotional Support Dog.