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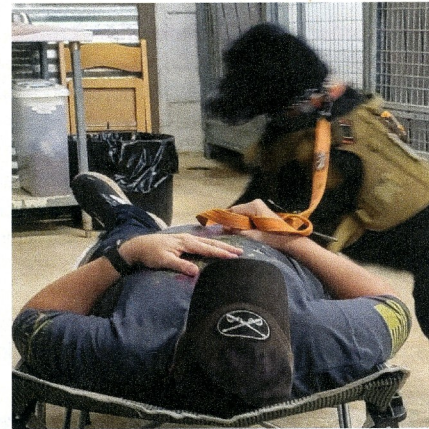


Unconditional Love...And Healing

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Tragedy does not always occur in a combat zone, as many active-duty troops and veterans face new battles with mental health and substance abuse once they return home. However, more than 3,000 individuals have found that help and healing come at the tip of a wagging tail through Warriors Heart, a unique therapy program targeted at military veterans and first responders.

“With an average of 22 veteran suicides per day, and one law enforcement officer every 17 hours in the U.S., this K9 Therapy program has been called a ‘lifesaver’ by

military, veteran and first responder clients who are given the option to adopt a service dog custom-trained for them to take home after treatment,” explains Michelle “Cash” Axmaker, manager of the Warriors Heart K9 Therapy Program. “Warriors Heart is the first and only private residential treatment center in the U.S. that exclusively helps warriors—military, veterans and first responders—struggling with addiction, post-traumatic stress and co-occurring issues. Everyone that works on the Warriors Heart team is connected to the warrior community, so we understand their pain—

either as a veteran, former first responder and/or by having a family member who is/was a warrior.”

Warriors Heart K9 Therapy Program is a 42-day in-patient residential treatment program operating in two locations: a 543+ acre ranch in Bandera, Texas and a 520+ acre ranch in Milford, Virginia, between Washington DC and Richmond. The program includes evidence-based treatment with licensed clinicians, along with electives such as K9 therapy. Warriors Heart is privately owned and accepts insurance from most insurance carriers, including



TRICARE, along with private pay. If a client chooses to adopt a dog, there is a relatively low fee. And if the warrior cannot afford it, the organization works with non-profit organizations who may be able to provide financial support. A number of foundations accept donations to support Warriors Heart, including the Frontline Healing Foundation.

"Warriors Heart opened in 2016, and the K9 program has been an important elective since then for our clients," Axmaker explains. "Because dogs are 'man's best friend,' the Warriors Heart K9 Program was designed to provide our clients with emotional support that traditional therapy and medications cannot when someone is struggling with addiction, PTSD, anxiety, trauma, depression, suicide ideation and co-occurring issues."

Axmaker herself was a veteran spouse, as well as being a former zookeeper and trainer. "I transitioned to Joint Base San Antonio, Lackland's Military Working Dog program with Civil Service in 2010," she recalls. "I worked with active duty and veterans from all military branches. I met lots of amazing veterans and active duty from all branches. And that's really where my passion began, where I wanted to start helping the warrior class with dogs.

"The benefits of the Warriors Heart K9 Program are to increase the client's confidence, reduce anxiety and give them a

sense of purpose," she adds, noting that October 10 is World Mental Health Day, focusing on getting people talking about their mental health and eradicating the stigmas associated with mental illness. "The majority of Warriors Heart clients are 'dual-diagnosis,' which means they go to their 42-day in-patient treatment program for both mental health and substance abuse issues."

Warriors Heart has two different types of dogs within the therapeutic program: Emotional Support Dogs (ESA) and Service Dogs. "An ESA dog can help increase the confidence and comfort of a warrior in their day-to-day lives by providing companionship," Axmaker notes. "A Service Dog is trained for a specific individual and specific support behaviors such as reducing PTSD, anxiety, nightmares and more. For example, if someone has PTSD and shakes their leg when they are nervous, we train the dog to touch their handler's leg to calm them and call attention to that behavior. This specialized training takes 120 hours to train a dog for each support behavior."

The Warriors Heart K9 Program also has two options for clients, which include the K9 Experience and the K9 Academy. "The client can either spend quality time with the dogs during treatment with the K9 Experience, and/or be trained as a 'handler'

for a specific dog who they want to adopt and take home after treatment with the K9 Academy," Axmaker explains. "During treatment, the warriors can do nature hikes with our dogs and learn dog training. We have classroom style learning. Our clients can brush and bathe those dogs and just enjoy the therapeutic benefit of being with the dog.

"Warriors Heart's goal is to pair veterans and first responders with Service Dogs that can help them replace bad habits—addiction, PTSD, and co-occurring issues—with good habits and reduce PTSD," she continues. "These dogs offer purpose and passion that can result in better emotional and physical health, which helps reduce deaths by suicide. We work seven days a week directly with our warriors to create a therapeutic dog training space and positive interactions. Our Service Dogs do so much more than a trained task to mitigate symptoms. They become the battle buddy for the warrior. The dog is encouraging their handler to get up in the morning and stay on routine. They're encouraging them to be physically active. So, we're going to go out and walk our dog or play with our dog and throw that ball, get out and get that fresh air and that sunshine."

Warriors Heart has served more than 3,000+ clients since 2016 and the K9 program averages 50 trained dog adoptions



Five Ways Warriors Heart's K-9 Program Helps Warriors Heal

1. Gives warriors a sense of "hope and healing" during their 42-day in-patient treatment—they can see a "future" by being trained to adopt a service dog to take home.
2. Gives warriors a sense of purpose by caring for a service dog—who is often a rescue dog with wounds, so they are healing each other.
3. Provides warriors with daily physical activity and a routine—that replaces bad habits with good habits, major part of recovery.
4. Gives warriors comfort during difficult times: Warriors Heart's K9s are custom trained based on the individual's needs to mitigate PTSD symptoms, panic attacks, Tourette's Syndrome ticks, seizures, nightmares, social anxieties, dissociation, lower-level anxieties and more.
5. Provides life-saving companionship when the warrior leaves treatment, especially for those who may be living in isolation—K9 therapy and training also continues when they go home.

annually. "Our Warriors Heart K9 program alumni report better family relationships, higher work productivity, reductions in medications, and a more positive outlook on life," Axmaker comments. "Our clients have been able to do family activities again with the assistance of their Service Dogs. They have gone on Disney vacations and proudly walked across college graduation stages with their K9 battle buddy. They report a more positive outlook on life, renewed sense of purpose, and love having a four-legged battle buddy to lean on.

"Service dogs give warriors comfort during difficult times, which can mean so many different things," she continues. "A lot of people will isolate. They may not leave their home or bedroom, or only go to places that are very, very familiar to them. Having a dog as a companion can make those situations more comfortable, and they can encourage you to get up and leave the house, even if it's just for a short walk."

If a warrior wants to adopt a dog, both the clinical team and K9 department are involved in this decision-making process. "The licensed clinicians have a different relationship with the warrior. They're going to know if they're emotionally ready to add a dog to their life," Axmaker comments. "The team checks on things like financials to determine if they can afford the care for a dog. The Warriors Heart team takes all of these specifics very, very seriously to make sure that the dog will fit into their whole life."

The dogs themselves benefit from the program as Warriors Heart's K9 Program trains 75-80% rescue dogs and shelter dogs. "These are dogs that were maybe turned into the shelter by people who couldn't afford them or didn't want them," Axmaker says. "They're pretty sad, sitting in those shelters. So, we bring them in and they're paired up with a warrior, and essentially, they're both healing broken hearts with a special bond." 🇺🇸

For more information on Warriors Heart and their K9 program, visit Warriorsheart.com/Connect or call Warriors Heart's 24-hour hotline: **866-955-4035** that is answered by warriors. You can also follow Warriors Heart on social media.

