Perspectives of Veterans: Barriers and Facilitators Among PTSD Service Dog Handler Training

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Background

- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is most prevalent among veterans in the U.S. The prevalence of lifetime PTSD among U.S. Veterans is 9.4% (Wisco et al., 2022).
- Service dogs assist in providing mobility and medical alert care to improve the well-being and health of their handlers. Internally, 19% of psychiatric assistance dogs for active-duty military members and veterans with PTSD serve the service dog partnership (Leighton et al., 2022).
- Psychiatric service dog training is an innovative humananimal bond intervention that stimulates obedience commands to assist veterans with PTSD. However, many veterans experience challenges in PTSD service dog handler training.
- The Donabedian's Model is an evaluating assessment framework to improve healthcare delivery (Puri & Tadi., 2023)

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to assess structure, process, and outcome components based on Donabedian's Model to:

- 1. Understand diverse perspectives of veteran's service dog handler training process and experiences; and
- 2. Explore the barriers and facilitators impacting the PTSD service dog handler training process and experience.

Methodology

Design & Sample: Phenomenological Qualitative Study

 42 veterans diagnosed with PTSD across 9 training organizations with greatest need of service dog assistance

Procedures

 Semi-structured interviews given oral consent and approved by John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Inclusion Criteria

■ ≥ 18 years old military member diagnosed with PTSD and enrolled in 1 of the 9 service dog training organizations

Measures

Structure, Process, and Outcome

Data Analysis

Iteratively created codebooks, emerging themes were subcoded reflecting framework model using Atlas.ti

Results

Table 1. Characteristics of Veteran's

Characteristics of Participants Characteristics Group **PTSD Veterans** N = 42Age, M (S.D.), y 42.4 (9.1) Gender, n (%) Female 18 (42.9) Race/Ethnicity, n (%) 3 (7.1) American Indian or Alaskan Native 1 (2.4) 2(4.8)Black or African American Mexican or Latino 5 (11.9) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 1 (2.4) White or European American 29 (69.0) 1 (2.4)

Thematic analysis findings indicated eight (8) major themes for barriers and facilitators related to PTSD service dog handler training.

9 (21.4)

9 (21.4)

32 (76.2)

36 (85.7)

2 (4.8)

Figure 1. Voices from Veterans: Barriers & Facilitator Themes

Barriers

Mental Health Conditions, n (%)

Depression

Anxiety

Bipolar

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

Military Sexual Trauma (MST)

Access: 21% of participants expressed access as a barrier to service dog training. "I was looking for organizations outside of my state, but what if you're a person who needs a service dog and you can't find an organization around you or one that can house you and feed you."

Human emotions, feelings, and behavior: 17% of veterans share their struggle to depression during the service dog handler program. "Depression might be a barrier to being able to actually get everything done."

Cost: 14% of veteran interviewees illustrated a financial burden concern in living conditions and post-graduation recertification expenses. "I think that you know there is a financial burden on a guy that has to got go out who doesn't have much and provide for himself for five weeks... you are spending 1,500 bucks, and you only need to be there for four hours, you know."

Communication: Three out of the 42 participants (7%) described a lack of communication among training organizations. "I am asking you for help, and you are getting back to me 3 days later.. I feel like I am not a priority. They could have texted me back or something...I would say, communicate with me like you would communicate with your top client."

Facilitators

Veteran peer support (VPS) Battle Buddies: 19% of veterans further highlighted veteran peer support provided a positive training experience. "It's very helpful just to hear that other people have experienced the same things I have because I have avoided group sessions... It just makes me feel like I am less alone.."

Post-graduation support: Six participants (14%) detailed benefits to receiving advanced training after graduation. "New things keep popping up all of the time... I am still learning all of the vet stuff, but I can always call back to the training organization and get all of that free guidance and instruction.

Training staff support: Nine participants (9%) emphasized training staff support as a significant positive enhancer to their training experience. "When I am having difficulty in classes, the trainers are very good to step aside and talk to me, and they will guide me to show me ways that work better."

Family inclusion: 7% of interviewees explained training experiences built support and inclusivity among family members. "As far as PTSD goes, involving your loved ones around that person to help them understand what PTSD is, because you start talking to other veterans with PTSD, our stories are all the same, we are all the same person, and it really opened my wife's eyes..."

Theoretical Framework

Themes were guided by Donabedian's model constructs to evaluate and understand the experiences and perspectives of service dog handler training among veterans with PTSD.

Figure 2. Donabedian's Model

- Aims to measure physical characteristics of service dog training organizations
- Staffing Attributes of resources Facilities
- Observational field study notes

STRUCTURE

- **PROCESS**
- to service dog handler training Performance to practice standards

Focuses on the delivery of care

Diverse types of services Access to services

interviews

- One-on-one semi-structured
- Examine veteran's quality of care
- and experience Adverse events
- Satisfaction to care One-on-one semi-structured
- interviews
 - OUTCOME

to service dog assistance training

Conclusion

- By introducing a participant-center approach, findings revealed barriers to access (21%) and facilitators to veterans' peer support (19%) significantly influenced veterans experiences and perspectives to service dog handler training.
- Inclusion criteria only considered veterans involved in one of the nine organizations and excluding other mental health disabilities to the enrollment of the study. Researcher induced bias may be involved, limiting generalizable findings.
- Donabedian's domains of structure, process, and outcome delivered insight in developing future measures towards considering the emotional and psychological well-being of veterans during service dog training. In the future, there is a need to develop service dog provider programs that meets the quality-of-care needs of veterans' journey to PTSD recovery.

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References

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