

# INSIGHTS INFORMING THE CONCERNS OF POST- 9/11 VETERANS AND FAMILIES

*Case Study:*

*Warrior Canine Connection*



SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY'S INSTITUTE FOR VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES (IVMF) HAS BEEN CONTRACTED TO SUPPORT THE GEORGE W. BUSH INSTITUTE'S RESEARCH TO EFFECTIVELY SERVE AND EMPOWER OUR POST-9/11 VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES.



# GEORGE W. BUSH INSTITUTE



## WARRIOR CANINE CONNECTION CASE STUDY

### 1. Organizational Overview

#### History

Warrior Canine Connection (WCC), headquartered in Brookeville, MD, is a non-profit organization that provides opportunities for service members and veterans who are suffering from post-traumatic stress (PTS) and/or traumatic brain injury (TBI) to train service dogs for their fellow service members. This pairing process is both healing and restorative for the trainer, and the outcome is a trained service dog for a fellow service member suffering from PTS, TBI, or other physical or mental deficits.

In July 2008, WCC Founder Rick Yount created the first Warrior dog training program to provide a safe, effective, non-pharmaceutical intervention to help treat the symptoms of PTS and TBI. The program, based at the Palo Alto VA's Men's Trauma Recovery Program in Menlo Park, CA, evolved into a highly respected intervention. In 2009, Yount established the Warrior Dog Training Program at Walter Reed Army Medical Center's Warrior Transition Brigade (WTB) in Washington, D.C. In October of 2011, he and the program were invited to be part of the PTS/TBI research, treatment, and education mission at the new National Intrepid Center of Excellence (NICoE), in Bethesda, MD, on the grounds of the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. That same year, Warrior Canine Connection was incorporated to expand the availability of its therapeutic service dog training program to the Department of Defense and VA medical treatment facilities throughout the country and to conduct research to establish this model as an evidence-based therapy for PTS and TBI. Also in 2011 the headquarters, service dog training, and puppy enrichment centers were established on leased property within the Patuxent River State Park administered by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources.

In addition to its work with NICoE, a unique differentiating factor between WCC and other dog training programs is the engagement of veterans suffering from PTS/TBI as trainers for the dogs. After "graduation" from its training, each service dog is then matched with a veteran in need. To date, thousands of service members and veterans suffering from symptoms of combat stress have participated.

#### Mission Statement

The mission/vision of the organization is as follows: "Warrior Canine Connection is a pioneering organization that utilizes clinically based Canine Connection Therapy to help wounded Warriors reconnect with life, their families, their communities, and each other."

By interacting with the dogs as they move from puppyhood to training to adult service dogs, Warrior Trainers benefit from a physiological and psychological animal-human connection. As a result of veteran trainers' efforts, other veterans with disabilities receive highly-trained service dogs.

### Organizational Structure

Warrior Canine Connection is a 501(c)(3) incorporated nonprofit organization led by Rick Yount, Executive Director, and overseen by a Board of Directors. Other staff includes a COO, CFO, Director of Dog Programs, Director of Research, Public Relations Officer, and a number of service dog trainers and handlers. The Board of Advisors includes corporate professionals, retired military personnel, and environmentalists.

WCC has one location in Brookeville, MD, a suburb of Washington, D.C. Trained service dogs from this location are used in the treatment of veterans at the following off-site military installations: NICoE; Brain Injury Unit at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center; Warrior Transition Unit also at Walter Reed; Warrior Transition Unit, Ft. Belvoir, VA; and the Palo Alto VA Health Care System, Menlo Park, CA. In addition, WCC provides service dogs to NeuroRestorative National Capitol, a residential rehabilitative facility in Germantown, MD.

WCC also has a large cadre of volunteers who serve in many capacities, including puppy petters, who interact with the dogs in their infancy, and puppy parents, who care for and house the dogs when not participating in training with service members and veterans. Volunteers serve as "ambassadors" for the program, taking service dogs to public events like fairs, schools, scout troop meetings, etc., in an effort to spread the message about the program and its mission.

### Programming

Warrior Canine Connection's programming is embedded in its mission: to provide trained service assistance dogs to wounded veterans suffering from stress associated with exposure to combat, as well as other severe traumatic injuries. By engaging veterans in the training of the service dogs, a veteran who might not be responding to other modes of treatment also receives the psychological benefit of the animal-human bond.

The specially-bred service dogs arrive at the WCC facility as puppies, where they receive initial training from experienced staff. At approximately 10 weeks of age the puppies are placed with individuals and families who care for them over the next 18-24 months. These "puppy parents" provide socialization, training and exposure to a wide variety of public settings and situations that prepare the puppy for advanced training and placement with a veteran with disabilities. "Puppy parents" often work at the facilities where service dog training occurs, so they bring the dogs to work with them, and during the day, the dogs participate in the training programs with wounded warriors.

In 2011 WCC began providing therapeutic service dog training at NICoE. Based on the concept of warriors helping warriors, the program was designed to mitigate the symptoms of PTS and TBI, while giving recovering combat veterans a sense of purpose, assistance in reintegrating back into their families and communities, and a potential career path as a service dog trainer. As part of their treatment, wounded warriors may volunteer to work as trainers through the Service Dog Training Program located on base. These veteran trainers are taught proper handling techniques and commands by authorized service dog trainers. More importantly, the veteran trainers provide much-needed socialization training by walking the

dog around the campus, through the Post Exchange, or while visiting in-patient units. In this way, many veterans who themselves suffer from PTS have been able to overcome their anxiety and stress about being in public places or exposure to large crowds. One veteran trainer described breaking out into a sweat when faced with having to walk down a crowded hallway:

“Knowing my experience of my social anxiety that I struggled with, with crowds and people bumping into you and idiots walking four people abreast in a hallway and you can’t get around them and you just want to get through and where the hell is the exit?”

However, because the veteran trainer knew that he was responsible for training the dog for use by a fellow wounded service member, his focus was on the dog’s comfort level, not his own. This particular veteran trainer went on to say,

“Having that focus in those different areas and having the mission to make the dog successful, none of that matters anymore. You know...you’re not worried about the four people abreast and how can I get around them, or where’s the next alcove.”

Instead, the dog served as an icebreaker in social situations, where strangers would approach and ask if they could pet the dog. This leads to conversation and socialization not only for the dog, but for the veteran training the dog as well. Some of the veterans noted that they appreciated the fact that when strangers approached them while in uniform, the conversation became about the dog, as opposed to about their service, or in some cases, about their wounds. As another veteran trainer noted,

“It’s an amazing, acceptable barrier, you know what I mean? It really is this social, I hate to say you’re hiding behind the dog, but it does, it takes all the attention off of you and you talk about what you’ve been doing with the dog.”

WCC’s flagship therapeutic service dog training program operates at the National Intrepid Center of Excellence (NICoE), based at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. There are nine NICoE Satellite Centers planned for military installations around the country to extend care currently provided at NICoE, and WCC hopes to expand its ability to provide service dogs at each of these facilities. WCC has expanded its program services to include service members and veterans receiving treatment at the following locations: Warrior Transition Units at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and Fort Belvoir, VA; Palo Alto VA Health Care System, Menlo Park, CA; and an eight-bed residential rehabilitative facility at NeuroRestorative National Capitol in Germantown, MD.

In addition, WCC has received requests to establish therapeutic service dog training programs at seven medical centers or military installations around the country. There are also plans to open a second NeuroRestorative facility, and WCC will provide facility dogs for this site.

### Veteran Populations Served

As noted by its mission statement, Warrior Canine Connection directly serves service members and veterans suffering from psychiatric or physical disabilities by providing service dogs, facility dogs in treatment centers, or military family support dogs. This is accomplished through its training program which involves veterans as dog trainers or recipients of service dogs.

However, in the course of carrying out this mission, WCC touches the lives of many more people, veteran and non-military. The families of veterans share the benefits of a service dog through the improved behaviors of their wounded family member. Veterans attest to the fact that training or having a service dog has brought them out of their state of emotional numbness and taught them how to interact with their children and spouses. Training the dogs gives many veterans a sense of purpose. At the VA in Menlo Park, CA, 1,000 service members participated in the program last year; at Walter Reed that number totaled 750. The program “graduated” five service dogs in October, 2013, and currently has 25 applications from veterans waiting for a service dog. By its own estimate, WCC states that one puppy touches the lives of 60 people, from the volunteers to the trainers to the final end-user.

### Funding Sources and Strategies

As a 501(c)3 organization, Warrior Canine Connection depends entirely on financial donations and in-kind support to facilitate its operations. WCC obtains funding from over 30 listed corporate sponsors, as well as private donors and fundraising activities. Corporate sponsors include companies such as Toyota, Home Depot, Choice Hotels, Discovery Communications, and CraigConnects. Advertising services are provided at no cost by Crosby Marketing, which also redesigned the organization’s website, and legal services are provided pro bono by Venable LLC. Support is also derived from a number of private foundations, including Newman’s Own, The Annenberg Foundation, Bob Woodruff Foundation, and Bob and Renee Parsons Foundation. The majority of financial support comes from individual donations, primarily through the organization’s website and Facebook page. For example, a subset of WCC’s social media following called “Extreme Puppy Watchers” (a group with nearly 2,000 members), is cited as being the most generous donors and fundraisers, and the force behind multiple web-based fundraising efforts through CrowdRise, a for profit e-commerce website that uses crowdsourcing to raise charitable donations. CFO Vicki Robinson noted that WCC has won two out of three CrowdRise challenges, netting the organization \$300,000. However, leadership recognizes that they cannot always depend on donations alone.

WCC currently has a relationship with the Semper Fi Fund, which provided financial support to a veteran who was studying to become a licensed certified dog trainer and is now working at WCC.

A key partnership was developed with state and local government, including the State of Maryland Department of Natural Resources and the Maryland Park Service, which provided the lease for WCC’s current location within a state park. In May of 2014, State of Maryland officials approved a 25-year lease on another State-owned park property in Germantown, MD, that will accommodate the expansion of WCC and help meet its long-term needs. The five-year property development plan for the 80-acre site has an estimated cost of \$1.4 million. WCC has received a large grant in support of this project, and local corporations such as Home Depot have offered to donate materials, services, and expertise in the project’s development. WCC leaders are also planning a capital campaign to complete the funding for its new headquarters and training facility.

WCC leadership has developed a strategic plan that addresses a number of areas they see as key to their viability. These five areas include: program development and expansion; research; education and outreach; branding; and corporate development and funding.

## 2. Measurement and Data Supporting Effectiveness & Impact

### Types of Data Routinely Collected

Warrior Canine Connection cites extensive anecdotal data regarding the effectiveness and impact of its program. Years of what appears to have been demonstrable success and reduction in symptoms are now beginning to be supported by research and data – success which has thus far been difficult to quantify without the ability to conduct clinical research studies. According to WCC researcher Meg Daley Olmert, clinicians from the pilot program model used in Palo Alto presented findings at a 2009 VA mental health conference, which revealed a reduction in PTS symptoms. Similar findings were observed at NICOE, where treatment-resistant patients are monitored using three measures: clinical observation, sleep studies, and heart rate variability. However, NICOE provides a range of treatment modalities, including yoga, art therapy, Reiki, meditation, acupuncture, etc., from which the patient is able to self-select after an orientation to each modality. According to Capt. Sara Kass, Medical Director at NICOE, because they offer so many therapy options it “becomes difficult to tease out what affects impact.”

Clinicians and caregivers at all facilities that utilize WCC service dogs report that they see a reduction in anxiety, stress, and sleep disorders, all of which can affect behavior. There is also evidence that exposure to the dogs can result in reduction in the need for pain and/or sleep medications. Program organizers state that use of the service dogs has experientially shown a reversal in the pattern of abuse and dysfunction in families. However, none of these findings are currently quantified through formal data collection.

As previously noted, WCC does track participation in its program at the VA in Menlo Park, CA, where 1,000 service members participated in the program last year; at Walter Reed that number totaled 750. The program “graduated” five service dogs in October, 2013, and currently has 25 applications from veterans waiting for a service dog. By its own estimate, WCC states that one puppy touches the lives of 60 people, from the volunteers to the trainers to the final end-user.

### Data Analysis and Reporting

Currently, WCC is not required to collect, analyze or report data as part of any grant or funding source. However, at the time of this interview WCC was about to conduct a six-week trial in partnership with NICOE that will involve volunteers diagnosed with PTS. This research is being funded through a \$4 million grant as part of the 2014 National Defense Authorization Act. Outcome measures include psychological evaluation regarding levels of depression, anxiety, sleep disorder, social interaction, and physiologic functions. A control group will undergo the same evaluation measures but “treatment as usual”. Evaluators hope the results will establish a scientifically-based treatment that can become a model for replication at VA hospitals and treatment centers around the country.

As part of its long-term strategic plan, WCC is seeking accreditation through ADI (Assistance Dogs International). Membership in ADI will include regular assessments to ensure that WCC is meeting the high standards expected of assistance dog programs and require more rigorous policies and procedures regarding recordkeeping and data collection.

### How data are used for getting to impact

NICOE provides WCC with the number of patients engaged with service dogs on an annual basis, and also

conducts patient satisfaction surveys at the end of treatment. While the number of survey results is low (20 per month), cumulatively animal-assisted therapy ranks in the top 10 and sometimes top 5 forms of therapy offered, out of 40 modalities available at the Center. WCC plans to move toward a more formal documentation procedure with NICoE in the near future.

Clinicians at NeuroRestorative report to WCC when they see improvement in patients' memories, cognitive skills, and interactions with family as a result of the responsibility for training a service dog. Like the treatments available at NICoE, service dog training is one modality of treatment available to the residents at NeuroRestorative, where the long-term goal is discharge and family reintegration.

WCC leaders recognize that a more scientifically-based study is needed in order to demonstrate effectiveness of the intervention. As part of their strategic plan, WCC intends to execute additional research studies on sleep and isolation, the efficacy of the WCC program, and optimal dog breeds for service dog training. There are also plans to collaborate with research facilities, such as universities and corporations engaged in relevant projects. These efforts will provide research-based data that will inform the therapy and provide evidence of its impact.

#### Formal Evaluation Activities (internal and external)

As previously mentioned, WCC has long-term plans to engage in formal evaluation activities with external entities, such as research universities and corporations engaged in relevant projects. It also hopes to continue its research studies with NICoE to determine program efficacy. WCC does not engage in formal internal evaluation activities, although it should be noted that the organization has a small staff and all members have multiple and sometimes overlapping responsibilities, making staff performance difficult to benchmark and evaluate. As part of its long-term strategic plan, WCC intends to “develop and improve operational processes to support existing operations and future expansion.” Part of this effort will include developing metrics that measure internal and external performance.

### 3. Strategic Themes

#### Veteran Programming Differentiation

Warrior Canine Connection is by definition a specialized program designed to meet the needs of service members and veterans with disabilities, and therefore not designed for the broad veteran population, as it is not necessary for the wholly “well” veteran to participate. That said, within this group of service members and veterans with disabilities, it does not differentiate its programming pre- or post-transition, male or female, combat veteran or noncombat, etc.

One somewhat selective area of differentiation that has become evident at NICoE, however, is an increase in demand for service dogs from special operations personnel who are in treatment at NICoE who seek to return to active service. Dr. Thomas DeGraba noted that special operations training mirrors the interdisciplinary modalities offered at NICoE, which might also make treatment there more appealing for special operations service members.

An important element of the organization's programming is the involvement of wounded veterans who serve as trainers of the service dogs that eventually go to a veteran in need. This idea of veterans helping veterans, or peer-to-peer assistance has proven instrumental in establishing the effectiveness of the

program as almost a side-effect of the intervention. Rather than turning inward to focus on their past trauma, the trainers must get outside of their own comfort zone to focus on the dogs and their mission to help another veteran. Additionally, dogs offer opportunities for the veteran trainers – who often isolate themselves from society – to experience positive interactions with members of the community. The training requires service members to demonstrate positive emotion in order to successfully teach their dogs. This also provides the veteran trainer with a sense of purpose or giving back, knowing that the dog they are training will eventually go to a fellow veteran in need.

Training a service dog for a fellow veteran provides a valuable opportunity for a veteran suffering from psychological injuries to reintegrate into civilian life. As part of their training, veterans have the responsibility to teach the dogs that the world is a safe place. Through that process, they are forced to overcome their own fears, stress and anxiety. They may deny that they have PTSD. Some suffer from survivor's guilt. Veterans returning to civilian life are forced to leave behind their military training and culture which endowed them with a strong sense of purpose – including that of watching each other's back in an intense environment. As Executive Director Rick Yount stated:

“In thinking about the void that that must create when you pull somebody out of that environment, especially for an injury, and all of a sudden they're in a hospital, VA or a military hospital, that sense of ultimate purpose and now you're a consumer of mental health or medical care. It's about being able to take this program, this idea of having service members, who are in a hospital setting and say, 'Hey, would you like to help out a fellow vet while you're here,' and introducing not just that sense of being a consumer of medical care, mental health care but being a contributor and tapping into that continued sense of mission would be a very positive thing on the simplest level of continued mission and purpose.”

Rick Yount went on to say, “Getting someone to agree that they need to overcome their own fears for the sake of another veteran, then we can tap into that warrior ethos, which is very, very powerful motivation and use that as a motivation to participate in something that is very therapeutic for the service members themselves, because that resistance to treatment or not buying into treatment, which is very problematic, but being able to say, 'Hey, I need your help to train this dog for another veteran,' really kind of flanks that resistance to treatment.”

Tapping into that peer-to-peer bond, that sense of duty, allows WCC to leverage the powerful motivation found in veterans to take care of fellow veterans. The idea of using this bond differentiates WCC among other treatment modalities. In the course of training each service dog, the veteran trainer is forced to challenge his or her own feeling of isolation and, therefore, contribute to his or her own healing. In this way, WCC has created a unique approach in the treatment of PTSD/TBI.

### Women Veteran Efforts

Warrior Canine Connection does not differentiate its programming for women veterans. According to Capt. Kass, the Medical Director at NICoE, they currently do not see many women seeking treatment for PTSD or TBI.

### Reintegration with Family

By interacting with the WCC service dogs through training, service members and veterans benefit from a physiological and psychological animal-human connection. As a result of the training, veterans participating in the program have reported that using positive emotions to praise their dogs has significantly improved their family dynamics and interactions with their children. Similar anecdotal evidence has been provided by veterans who receive a service dog. The impetus for this innovative approach began almost 20 years ago when Founder Rick Yount, who holds a Master's degree in Social Work, began working with at-risk teens. As part of their therapy, the teenagers trained mobility service dogs for people within their community, and Yount quickly noted the parallels to effective parenting techniques used in training the dogs: consistency, using the right commands, and setting limits. Another critical component to dog training is exhibiting patience and providing praise. For Rick Yount, his focus eventually shifted to veterans training service dogs for veterans. Yount notes that some veteran trainers are initially resistant to one particular training technique (the dogs are praised in a high-pitched, "Richard Simmons-like" voice), stating that they are emotionally detached. However, as they progress with the dog training, they begin to see changes in their own behavior towards their families, especially their children – that essentially, by "faking" positive emotion with the dog to praise the dog for positive behavior, positive emotions actually begin to manifest themselves within the veterans, and these positive emotions (and positive reinforcement techniques) transfer to the veterans' interactions with their own families. One of the earliest veteran trainers in Palo Alto was asked "How is this helping you?" This former Marine Staff Sergeant replied:

"Man, before I got involved with training these dogs, my wife and I were getting ready to split, and it was mostly due to the way I was treating our three-year-old son. I was honestly treating him like a stubborn private, and it wasn't going well, anywhere. When I started working with this dog, learning how to praise the dog and the patience that I've been practicing in training the dog, I realized I started using that and patterning that approach with my son. To be honest, it taught me how to connect with my three-year-old on a three-year-old's level."

Additional anecdotal feedback echoes this sentiment, that through their dog training experience, wounded veterans have been able to reconnect with their spouses and children, thus aiding in their reintegration with family.

Due to its close proximity to WCC Headquarters, clinicians from NeuroRestorative visit the site on a regular basis with residents, allowing them to interact with the dogs housed on-site. In partnering with NeuroRestorative, WCC also provides facility dogs to residents of the rehabilitative facility who have suffered severe PTS or TBI. Currently two service dogs are assigned to the facility, Navi and Brie. According to Katie Gorman, Life Skills Trainer, residents can work towards goals related to the care of the service dogs, such as feeding the dogs or letting them outside:

"Depending on the severity of the injury, a therapeutic goal for one of them may be building up to a sleepover with Navi, and that's going to be, can they show that they can get up on time, that they can feed her, with prompts from the staff, like, 'It's 8:00 AM. Is there something you should be doing now?'"

Following interactions with the dogs, Gorman notes a positive change in the emotional outlook of the

residents, particularly when they communicate and interact with their families. Clinicians and staff at NeuroRestorative also note the positive effect on injured veterans through their interactions with the facility dogs, which includes improved memory, increased cognitive skills, and socialization.

### Transition to Civilian Life

Due to its partnership with military treatment facilities, WCC is in a unique position to connect with service members who are already receiving treatment for PTS/TBI or severe physical disabilities and may need or want a therapeutic service dog, or be interested in training a service dog. At that point in time, the service member may have already experienced a number of interventions and be months or years beyond transition from the military. In this way, WCC programming can facilitate the transition process for many veterans. One veteran trainer explained:

“...we started working with [a dog], and I cannot tell you the difference in demeanor it made. I just had all this social anxiety...it was an irrational fear, going back years...our lives were in danger often... I mean, there was a lot of really bad things that went on there that really gave me a distrust of public, you know, and public places, and I absolutely hate the Metro or anywhere there’s a crowd. I mean, just really get clammed up. The first day that we worked together...if you’ve been through the main part of the hospital, there’s Main Street and it’s pretty much always crowded and bustling, like I always would see that and I was like, ‘ooh, I don’t want to walk through there’ but just go, you know, and I’m too big to lower my shoulder and just like knock people down...we went walking through there and it was the coolest thing, because [the dog] is right here, he’s looking right at me, like, ‘hey, dude, are you going to get me through this safely?’ I’m aware of him, like, ‘hey, man, I got this’...it was this symbiotic relationship that just formed. And I mean, and it brought out all these...little reminders and feelings of leadership that I had...it’s so hard to quantify but it really brought it in order.

This veteran has since been paired with his own service dog and reports that he has been able to reduce his anxiety medications and has reconnected with his children as a result of his experience with Warrior Canine Connection.

Word-of-mouth is another mechanism through which veterans approach WCC and in many cases it is only after all other treatment modalities have failed. Executive Director Rick Yount related a story about an active duty staff sergeant who approached WCC for a service dog. Married with three small children, this soldier had failed many other treatment options. His personal life was deteriorating:

He said, “I don’t know. Ever since I came back from deployment, I’m just not the same guy I used to be. I don’t even want to be around my kids, feel disconnected. I’m just yelling at them all the time, and I can see them shutting down, and I hate it, the fact that my problems I can see manifesting in them. I’d just like to get a dog.”

As Rick Yount explained, such emotional detachment is an important component of military training that is not addressed during the transition period for veterans or active duty personnel who are no longer deployed. Through their work with a service dog, many veterans reconnect with these suppressed emotions, leading to more fulfilling, functional lives. After three sessions with the dog, Rick Yount noticed

a change in the staff sergeant's demeanor:

"It's night and day, watching those kids, and they're just having fun, happy. He's engaging, and he actually has a dog. He's doing outreach. They take the dog to church with them...and other soldiers are coming up and sharing their experience. So that dog is not only helping that family. It's exponentially increasing the outreach, because others are opening up when they're around the dog."

Through their programming – both in facilitating interactions with service dogs through training opportunities and through the actual provision of service dogs for life-long partnerships – WCC teaches life skills and breaks down emotional barriers which facilitate the transition from combat to healthy civilian life. Reintegration is made easier by de-escalating tension in veterans, deflecting conversation away from visible injuries and toward the dogs, and helping the veterans focus on caring for their dogs as opposed to on stressful situations they may find themselves in. The transition that WCC facilitates is almost entirely emotional and relational, though at times also cognitive for TBI survivors – all of which forms the building blocks for other aspects of transition such as employment and education.

### Employment and Education

Warrior Canine Connection does not specifically focus on employment or educational needs of veterans; its primary focus is assisting wounded veterans in achieving an improved quality of life. However, in taking on the responsibility of training a service dog a veteran may be more prepared to undertake educational pursuits or become more psychologically stable and capable of seeking employment. Through its partnership with the Semper Fi Fund, financial support was provided for a veteran to become a licensed service dog trainer, who is now employed at WCC. In the next year, WCC is moving to a new location that will greatly expand its training and services to include equine therapy. WCC leaders hope that some type of service animal training will become part of its organizational capabilities, providing veterans with the educational background in animal service training which could lead to employment in that field. Capt. Kass of NICOE notes that, "The training program is seen as being skills-based, with trainers learning skills applicable to broader functional relationships."

### Community Connectedness

Warrior Canine Connection has developed strategic partnerships with NICOE at Walter Reed, treatment units on military bases, and the Palo Alto VA in Menlo Park, CA. Through these partnerships WCC is promoting the use of service dogs as one intervention among a number of interdisciplinary interventions in the treatment of post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury. As WCC's primary focus is working with service members and veterans enrolled in DoD and VA treatment facilities, the organization is somewhat limited in terms of partnering with other service providers in the MSO/nonprofit landscape.

The partnership with NeuroRestorative began as the result of an Internet search by facility staff looking for some type of animal-assisted therapy. This initial contact has developed into a partnership with WCC donating two facility dogs to the facility with plans to continue to expand this partnership at a second location. As previously noted, clinicians from NeuroRestorative visit the WCC headquarters on a regular basis with residents, allowing them to interact with the dogs.

WCC is also developing a plan to expand training programs for service dogs that can be replicated around

the country, leading to an increase in service dog providers within the MSO community.

### Social Connectedness

A critical component of the training program requires that the veterans interact with the public so that the dogs become socialized and learn to integrate into their surroundings. In doing so, trainers are forced to overcome their own fears of being in public, large crowds, or talking to strangers. The successfully trained dog is then able to assist its eventual owner in also overcoming the fear and anxiety associated with PTS. Due to the nature of its training program, Warrior Canine Connection is a highly visible part of the community and as such, raises awareness around the issue of PTS/TBI. One of the most effective methods of communicating its mission and educating the community is by having dogs out in public with their trainers while wearing a “service dog in training” vest. This naturally invites conversation and WCC trainers are able to share the organization’s mission and get the word out about its program. Trainers are required to take their dog to work as part of the socialization training. A grant which provided the “puppy cam” (see below) created a world-wide following via social media. While interest was initially focused on the puppies, it has shifted to how puppies relate to the veterans through careful branding and emphasis on the mission. WCC “ambassadors” provide community education and outreach through visits to schools, community events, local fairs, etc. Local businesses provide dog food, supplies, and veterinary services. Volunteers assist in a variety of ways, from puppy petting to cleaning out dog pens. This level of community engagement may not necessarily lead to employment but raises awareness among the general population regarding the complex issue of treating veterans suffering from PTS/TBI or other extreme physical trauma in an effort to further bridge the civilian/military divide.

### Media

Jamie Williams is the public relations officer for WCC, and her responsibilities include marketing, communications strategies, copywriting, newsletters, online newsletters, and preparation of press releases, liaison with corporate sponsors, and any other tasks that fall under the communications umbrella.

A recent grant from the Annenberg Foundation provided a connection between WCC and Explore, a capacity-building initiative of the Foundation. With this grant, WCC set up a “puppy cam” to monitor new litters of puppies in the puppy enrichment center (PEC) 24 hours a day/seven days a week. A link to the puppy cam was posted on the explore.org website. According to Jamie Williams, WCC’s public relations officer, the social media presence “exploded” with the puppy cam, which had 2.5 million hits on Facebook. A subset of viewers calling themselves “Extreme Puppy Watchers” (EPW) set up their own Facebook page. This group includes over 2,000 members.

Williams credits the puppy cam with creating a “huge” civilian following, educating the public about the WCC mission, and providing an “aha” moment among viewers, helping to bridge the civilian/military divide. Williams believes the organization has “hit a really magic spot in social media where we’ve been able to coalesce a really huge community around us.” Williams updates posts on the organization’s website and provides links to news coverage in the local and national media. A specific effort is made to ensure that the target of posts on the website ties back to the WCC mission. WCC has also received national broadcast media coverage on Fox News and Good Morning America. Williams stated that WCC does not proactively seek media attention, but rather that the media tends to come to the organization.

In addition, Meg Olmert, Director of Research, has presented at two TEDx conferences and is a frequent speaker at scientific conferences where she also shares the successes of the WCC program.

### Independent Sector Involvement

WCC leadership is looking to partner with the University of Denver, School of Social Work, which has a program specific to the use of animal therapy. WCC would like to establish an internship program for social work students, as well as set up a training lab at the school. Executive Director Rick Yount sees this as a clear path to scale up the program and provide greater training opportunities and career paths for trainers. Private corporations and foundations partner with WCC through pro bono activities and financial support. Local businesses provide dog food, supplies, and veterinary services. A local Home Depot has agreed to provide the supplies needed in the construction of the organization's new facility.

Currently WCC is heavily dependent on individual donations with the majority of financial support coming through its website and Facebook page. As part of its strategic plan, WCC intends to "develop an appropriate corporate infrastructure that will ensure proper stewardship and sustain continued growth." WCC intends to achieve this goal by expanding the corporate structure, expanding its Advisory Board, developing and refining operating procedures, refining banking and accounting processes, and formalizing relationships and expectations with the Warrior Transition Brigade. In addition, WCC has started working with a grant writer and is applying for more grants.

## 4. Key Learnings and Reflections

### Catalysts of Impact

A key strength of WCC is its singularly focused mission: that of training service dogs. This is evident in its program development based on specific expertise, unique approach, and strong program design. This singular focus allows staff to provide a highly qualified service dog trained by veterans for veterans without the distraction of trying to fulfill other missions, such as housing or employment for the veteran. Another strength is the passion and commitment of the staff, who all support the mission and strongly believe in the therapeutic healing power of the animal-human bond. Countless volunteers, funders, and private sector supporters all help raise awareness about this alternative form of treatment for wounded veterans, which results in financial support and education of the broader community.

Yet another strength is the fact that WCC recognizes the powerful peer-to-peer bond among veterans, and leverages this characteristic as a critical component of its program. By identifying and leveraging this motivation among veterans, WCC is able to introduce the equally powerful human-animal bond as a treatment modality for the most resistant of cases. Director Rick Yount described countless cases of even the most socially withdrawn veterans who refused to even speak to providers – veterans with PTSD so severe that clinicians thought they had essentially lost the power of speech – who opened up upon interaction with the dogs. Even those service members who previously had no attachment to or interest in animals are motivated by the "leave no man behind" mentality which is deeply ingrained in them through their service, which then unlocks the potential of the healing power of the animals.

A key strength is the organization's collaboration with the military medical system, and particularly the National Intrepid Center of Excellence at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. At a time when the need for alternative interventions is increasing, WCC has positioned itself to work with the leading

institute dedicated to providing cutting-edge evaluation, treatment planning, research and education for service members and their families dealing with the complex interactions of mild traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress. WCC has successfully secured Congressional support in the form of a \$4 million research study being conducted at NICoE to establish the efficacy of the intervention in a scientifically-based evaluation. The outcome of the study will hopefully lead to expansion of the program to other military institutions around the country and provide WCC a base on which to scale-up its program design.

Finally, WCC has developed an extremely strong social media presence, in part due to the “puppy cam” experience. Their cadre of volunteers, including “ambassadors” who promote the program within community organizations, contributes to the public awareness of WCC’s mission. Volunteer dog trainers actively engage the public while socializing the service dogs, further contributing to the public’s education of WCC’s mission. It is not possible to overlook the fact that the dogs are highly appealing to the general public. Once informed of their mission, civilians may become long-term supporters of the program. This ability to leverage one “attention-getter” (puppies) to tell the story of another (veterans), is particularly unique among the veteran service provider community which typically focuses solely on highlighting its own service population.

### Barriers to Impact

One of the initial barriers faced by Rick Yount in his effort to provide service dogs to military personnel was the disinterest and opposition of the VA. Within the VA system, service dogs were put under the department that administered prosthetics and sensory aid services. In addition, VA leadership opposed the use of dogs for therapeutic purposes. When the VA did support the use of service dogs, it was in the role of “rescue” dog, often for the purpose of providing a barrier for the veteran; a dog that would “watch his back” and be used to perform such tasks as sweeping a room for intruders. According to WCC staff, this approach reinforces the symptoms of fear and anxiety experienced by those suffering from PTS. In addition, the VA would only cover the cost of obtaining a dog from another provider and allowed only limited veterinary care. The VA has also resisted the use of service dogs in its hospital settings with the exception of Menlo Park.

WCC understands that it needs to find a champion within the VA system who will recognize the important contribution animal-assisted therapy can have in the treatment of veterans suffering from PTS/TBI. Leadership is looking to the evaluation study being conducted with NICoE as a first step in establishing the scientific research base that supports the effectiveness of the program.

Coupled with the need for an efficacy trial, there currently are no industry standards for the training of service dogs. While other service dog programs exist, most do not provide the rigorous training conducted by WCC, or are more focused on preparing dogs for a single purpose, such as for use by the sight impaired. WCC needs to clearly define its brand and establish itself as a leader in the field of therapeutic service dog training. Addressing these branding challenges are currently part of the long-term strategic plan.

As with many organizations providing services to military veterans, competition for dwindling funds continues to be a barrier. Currently WCC is reliant on corporate funding and philanthropic support, but mostly on individual donations. WCC is on the verge of expanding its program and services and can only accomplish this through consistent and dependable financial support. At the same time, the organization is severely understaffed and almost all employees fill multiple roles. While this contributes to the sense

of camaraderie among the staff, WCC is about to expand beyond its capabilities to manage such growth. An effort should be made to develop a strong infrastructure to improve operational processes before the expansion is complete and the organization loses the ability to provide a high-quality product.

Finally, while cited as a strength, WCC's dependence on its relationship with NICOE to further its mission and contribute to its expansion seems to run the risk of overdependence on one relationship. The current administration at NICOE is highly supportive of WCC's program. However, should leadership change, or the VA or DoD decide it wants to support a newer alternative therapy, or discontinue alternative treatment methods, WCC may find itself struggling to find an equally motivated advocate.

### Ongoing Efforts to Enhance Impact

WCC is a relatively new organization which has been asked to establish new program sites at several additional DoD and VA medical treatment facilities. In order to meet current and future demand for the program, WCC must develop the infrastructure to offer its services more widely. To that end, WCC has entered into a 25-year lease on another state owned park in Germantown, MD that will accommodate WCC's expansion and long-term needs. The five-year property development plan for the 80-acre site has an estimated cost of \$1.4 million. WCC is beginning a capital campaign to raise needed funds for this expansion and development. The newly expanded site will allow WCC to increase its capacity to serve many more veterans in treatment at Walter Reed and other military installations and VA medical centers.

WCC's Congressionally-funded study, in collaboration with NICOE, is the first step to providing scientific evidence that the WCC approach works. Leadership hopes to conduct additional research studies to continue to establish research-based evidence of program effectiveness. Leadership believes that establishing effectiveness will enable them to create a replicable model. In the next five years WCC sees itself servicing military installations and VA hospitals around the country.

WCC's move to its new location will expand services and training opportunities for even more veterans in need, and is seen as a clear path to scaling up the intervention. A long-term goal is to provide career opportunities for wounded veterans as certified service-animal trainers.

WCC is working to address many issues associated with its ongoing expansion efforts in its strategic plan.