

Study measures psychological support provided by service dogs

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The physical benefits service dogs provide in assisting people with disabilities are well-known, but a new study conducted by a Purdue University research team reveals that service dogs also contribute significantly to emotional and psychosocial well-being.

The preliminary study results were shared during a presentation this week at the North American Veterinary Community (NAVC) Conference in Orlando, Fla.

The study compared service dog recipients and their family members with people and their families who are on a waiting list for service dogs.

"Even though the functional tasks service dogs perform to help with physical disabilities are well-recognized, the emotional and psychosocial effects of service dogs are largely unknown," said Maggie O'Haire, assistant professor of human-animal interaction in Purdue's College of Veterinary Medicine and leader of the Organization for Human-Animal Interaction Research.

This new research project on the human-animal bond is part of a four-year, primary research study of the emotional and health impacts that service dogs have on their recipients and family members. The goal of the three-part study is to produce groundbreaking, evidence-based research documenting the "pet effect," – or impact of the human-animal bond on mental health and well-being.

"Service dog recipients and their family members represent an ideal population with whom to conduct human-animal bond studies," O'Haire said.

The researchers worked with a nonprofit organization called Canine Assistants, which is dedicated to education and placement of service dogs with children and adults who have physical disabilities or other special needs.

Participants were invited to complete a brief, online survey that asked them to give their consent for the research team to access their initial application materials and any other information previously provided to Canine Assistants.

The online survey also included a questionnaire about emotional and psychosocial functioning. If a potential or current service dog recipient was a minor or had limited verbal skills, a family member completed a proxy survey on their behalf.

Additionally the study evaluated the emotional and psychosocial benefits of the human-animal bond for family members (parents, caregivers and spouses) of service dog recipients.

"Families sometimes face unique difficulties because of an individual family member's health," O'Haire said. "Our preliminary results show that, overall, family members with a service dog in the home exhibit better social and emotional functioning as well as decreased worry as a result of the recipient's health, compared to [family members](#) on the waitlist. Family members with a service dog also exhibited better management of daily family activities compared to those on the service dog waitlist.."

She also said these preliminary findings are not surprising, but they are

very significant.

"There is a wealth of positive anecdotal information but comparatively few data-driven scientific measures of how dogs affect their human companions' sense of well-being," she said.

O'Haire said her team's long-term research goal is to provide a scientific assessment of the effects of the human-animal bond on mental health and well-being outcomes.

"By evaluating both the recipient and a family member, these results may be applicable to a broad range of pet owners," she said.

Additional research is underway to fully analyze the data and confirm the initial results. The study is funded by Elanco Animal Health, which also supports Canine Assistants.

"Innovative research is key to protecting both human and animal health," said Heidi Hulon, consulting veterinarian for Elanco. "Elanco understands the powerful role healthy animals play in making lives better and this research has the potential to empower veterinarians and all those concerned with animal health to enrich the lives of people worldwide by supporting programs that promote the human-animal bond."

Provided by Purdue University

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