

# Psychiatric service dogs trained by inmates help veterans with PTSD

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.11.19

Word Count **947**

Level **1040L**

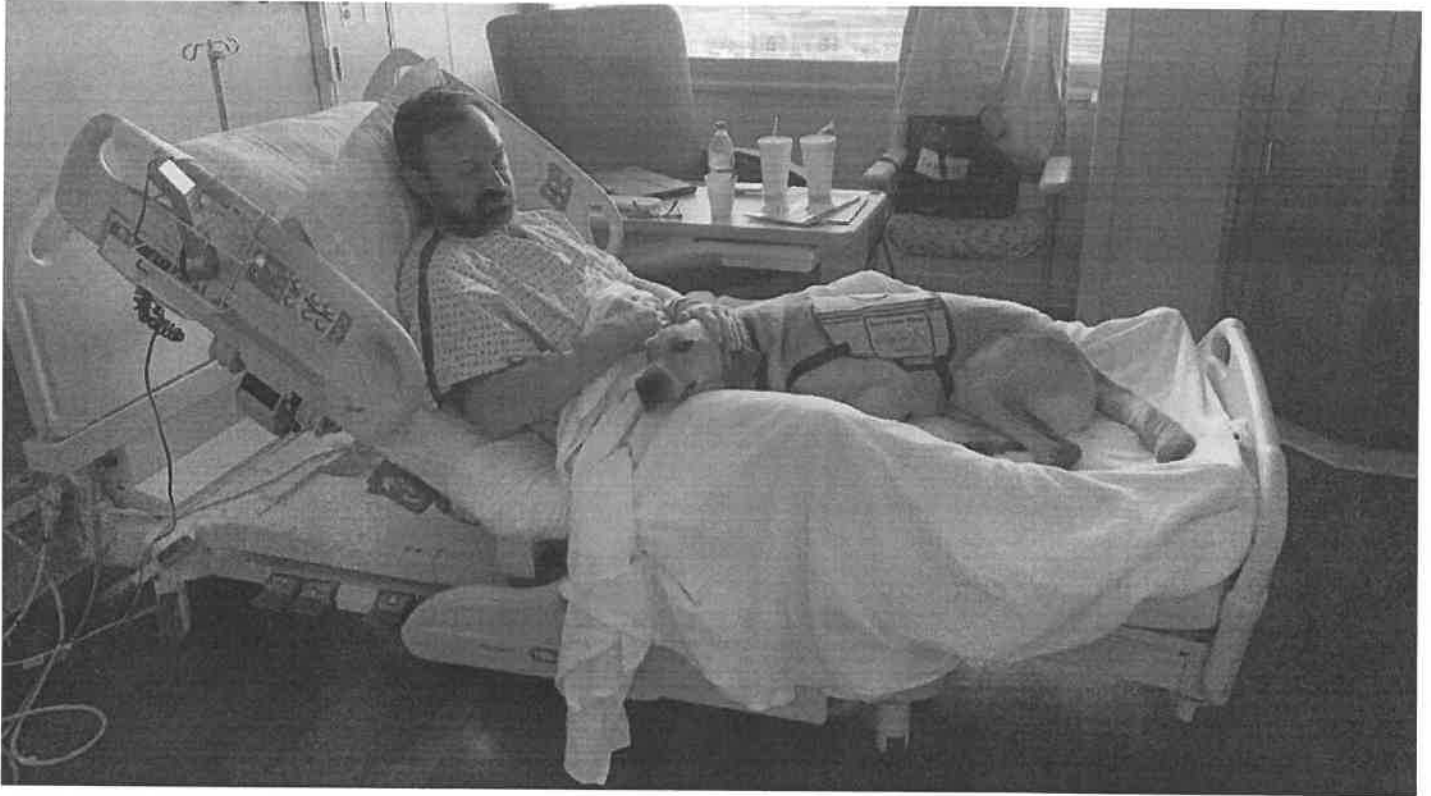


Image 1. Marine Corps veteran Al Moore recovers from his 18th surgery in July 2019. Kevin, his service dog, spent the night in the hospital with him. Photo by: Dawn Moore/Washington Post

Last year, Al Moore was gulping down a dozen medications to reduce physical pain and sometimes crippling post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This disorder can occur when a person experiences or witnesses a traumatic event, such as war combat. Moore's symptoms developed over 30 years in the Marine Corps.

Now, those drugs have been replaced by a painkiller Moore describes as a natural "medicine."

"We call him 'Kevin the wonder dog,'" said Moore's wife, Dawn, pointing to the Labrador retriever whose light brown eyes were fixed, as usual, on her husband. "He's always wondering, 'What can I do for you?'"

## Kevin The Wonder Dog

Kevin, a 3-year-old service dog with a golden fur coat, wakes Moore up when he has nightmares. He keeps Moore steady when he gets dizzy on stairs and turns on lights when he enters rooms.

Kevin makes Moore feel comfortable in grocery stores and doctors' offices, places he once couldn't go without Dawn.

"It not just saved my life, but my family's as well," Al Moore told a room full of prisoners and staff at the maximum-security prison in Cumberland, Maryland. A recent appreciation ceremony at the prison allowed Kevin to reunite with the prisoner who trained him.

Kevin is one of 23 service dogs trained at the Western Correctional Institution through a program run by America's VetDogs. The nonprofit pairs service dogs with veterans struggling with PTSD. Sully was former President George H.W. Bush's service dog, who became a viral sensation at Bush's funeral; he was trained through the program at a prison in Hagerstown, Maryland.

Moore, who has endured 19 surgeries over the past 27 years, directly addressed the inmates. "You guys are my heroes," Moore said. "Heroes come from every walk of life."



Sitting in the audience in the prison library, Herbert Wilson-Bey grinned. Kevin was the third service dog Wilson-Bey had trained, raising the dog from the time he was a 6-week-old puppy until he was more than a year old and was mature enough to be paired with a veteran.

Wilson-Bey, age 44, grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, and has spent his entire adult life in prison after being convicted of robbery and murder at age 17. Training the dogs, he said, has been one of his first real responsibilities. He has never held a job, and he could not help raise his son, who was 3 months old when Wilson-Bey went to prison.

The dogs stay with inmates 24 hours a day on weekdays. Then they spend weekends with volunteers to become accustomed to life outside prison.

"You are always working, but it is joyous work," said Wilson-Bey, who joined the program in 2013, to do something positive for the world. "If I put all my heart into this puppy, they are going to come out and be able to help someone."

At first, he thought bonding with the puppies was just about teaching them commands. Later, he understood the importance of showing them love.

"Put the puppy on your chest and let it feel your heart," said Wilson-Bey, who wears a necklace with a dog-paw emblem. "Let it lick your face, even if you might not like that."

### **Restorative Justice**

The ceremony at the prison was the first time Moore met the prisoner who trained his dog. It was also the first time prisoners had seen their former trainees since they graduated.

They celebrated the work between America's VetDogs and the Maryland prison training program. It began in 2012. The program is part of the system's effort to focus on restorative justice. This is the idea that people who have committed crimes should have the chance to redeem themselves.

There are six states with such prison training programs. Maryland boasts the most successfully trained dogs, said America's VetDogs spokeswoman Sheila O'Brien.

"What could be more restorative than changing someone's life for the better?" said Robert L. Green, who runs the state's correctional department. "It's all about healing."



When Moore and his wife arrived at the prison near the border of Maryland and West Virginia, Kevin responded. The dog's nose shot into the air and his tail wagged. Moore could tell the dog knew exactly where he was.

When Kevin saw Wilson-Bey, his whole body started shaking as he wagged even harder. Wilson-Bey crouched down as the dog nuzzled him.

Wilson-Bey told Moore, age 59, that Kevin helped him feel better, too.

Three months after being paired with Kevin in April, Moore slowly began going off his medications. They often made him feel forgetful and disconnected from his family. He recently stopped taking them altogether.

America's VetDogs is one of dozens of private organizations that train "psychiatric service" dogs. The groups aim to help address the military's urgent mental health problems. Yet program officials have also faced questions about the effectiveness of their efforts, and who should pay for them.

It takes more than \$50,000 to breed, raise, train, match and support a service dog trained through America's VetDogs. After the puppies graduate from the prison training, they receive an additional three months of formal training, O'Brien said. Veterans then come spend two weeks working with their new puppies. Veterans are never charged for the service. The organization relies largely on donations.

When the inmates rose to give a standing ovation during the ceremony, the service dogs stayed calmly at their sides.