

**Testimony of Steven Feldman
Human Animal Bond Research Initiative (HABRI) Foundation**

**Before
The U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on National Security**

April 14, 2016

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on National Security. My name is Steven Feldman, I am the Executive Director of the Human Animal Bond Research Initiative (HABRI) Foundation, a non-profit research and educational organization that works to fund scientific research on the human health benefits of companion animals. HABRI is in its third year of funding innovative research projects, which include studies on the benefits of animal-assisted interventions for children with autism, victims of domestic violence, and veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In addition to funding groundbreaking research, HABRI maintains the world's largest online library for scientific information on the human-animal bond, making it the most comprehensive resource in this growing field of study. HABRI works to inform the public about this research, including the need for public policies reflecting the definitive body of science that shows the significant, positive impact of companion animals on human health.

Veterans who suffer from physical and mental disabilities deserve every therapeutic treatment and form of ongoing support available to them. This includes service animals to aid in short- and long-term recovery. The U.S. Department of

Veterans Affairs (VA) currently supports service dogs for veterans “diagnosed as having visual, hearing, or substantial mobility impairment”. However, in 2012 the VA concluded that it would not support service animals for mental disabilities based on “a lack of evidence supporting a finding of mental health service dog efficacy.”ⁱ

HABRI strongly supports the Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers (PAWS) Act, HR 4764, which will direct the VA to carry out a pilot program to provide service dogs to veterans with severe PTSD. HABRI maintains that there is significant scientific evidence to substantiate the efficacy of service dogs for veterans with PTSD.

HABRI supported the first systematic review of the research on animal-assisted intervention (AAI) for victims of trauma conducted by Purdue University, which was published less than a year ago. The study found preliminary evidence that “animals may provide unique elements to address several PTSD symptoms.” Specifically, “people with PTSD often experience emotional numbing, yet the presence of an animal has been reported to elicit positive emotions and warmth. Animals have also been demonstrated as social facilitators that can connect people and reduce loneliness, which may assist individuals with PTSD break out of isolation and connect to the humans around them.”ⁱⁱ I think it is also important to note that no negative effects were reported. This study supports the conclusion that service dogs for trauma survivors, including veterans with PTSD, can positively affect depression, anxiety, social outcomes, sleep, and quality of life.

HABRI is currently funding a pilot study on the effects of service dogs on mental health and wellness in military veterans with PTSD. This study, which is scheduled to be completed this summer, analyzes 137 military veterans diagnosed with PTSD from a national service dog provider, K9s for Warriors, who either currently had a service dog or were on the waitlist to receive one. Scientists measured psychosocial and psychological functioning, including symptoms of PTSD, depression, life and relationship satisfaction, and quality of life. The researchers also collected salivary assays of cortisol awakening response to examine stress and hyper arousal.

Preliminary, unpublished results indicate that military veterans with a service dog exhibit significantly lower overall PTSD symptom severity. Compared to those on the waitlist, veterans with PTSD paired with service dogs demonstrated a better ability to cope with flashbacks and anxiety attacks; reduced frequency of nightmares and less overall sleep disturbance; lower anxiety, depression and anger; higher levels of companionship and social reintegration; increased overall psychological wellbeing; and higher levels of life satisfaction and resilience. While we must wait for the final results of this study to be published later this year, these preliminary outcomes are encouraging, and we felt that it was important to share them with you today.

I would also urge the Committee and the VA to look broadly at research studies indicating that several key measures of mental health and well-being are positively affected by animal-assisted interventions, including depression, anxiety and stress – all of which are symptoms associated with PTSD. For example, studies suggested that the

release of oxytocin, which occurs during positive contact with companion animals, “mediates a host of effects such as stimulating social interaction, reducing stress and increasing pain thresholds”ⁱⁱⁱ and that “interaction with a friendly companion animal, in particular a dog, positively affects endocrine responses as indicated by changes in the levels of cortisol...suggesting an attenuation of stress responses via HAI.”^{iv} This speaks to what is happening in a person’s brain when they interact with an animal: the level of oxytocin, a good hormone, increases, and the level of cortisol, a stress hormone, decreases.

A meta-analysis of five different studies concluded that AAI has the potential to significantly reduce depressive symptoms.^v In addition, a review of studies focusing on the health and mental benefits of interactions with companion animals found positive improvements in quality of life for people struggling with depression and anxiety.^{vi}

Additionally, a study published just last year found that people were more socially connected as a result of having companion animals and that such connections helped build strong social support systems.^{vii} This is especially relevant because social isolation may be associated with PTSD.

When you combine these documented therapeutic effects with the trained actions of a service dog, you get a powerful combination that can make a real impact for veterans. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) regulations recognize this, and includes service dogs for PTSD in their definition of service animals:

“Service animals are defined as dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities. Examples of such work or tasks include guiding people who are blind, alerting people who are deaf, pulling a wheelchair, alerting and protecting a person who is having a seizure, reminding a person with mental illness to take prescribed medications, calming a person with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) during an anxiety attack, or performing other duties.”

States increasingly recognize the need to update definitions of service animals to include mental disabilities as well. Last year, the State of Florida passed a law to expand the protection of its service animal statute to include traumatic brain injury and PTSD.

The inclusion of these protections allow veterans who have a disability that may not be outwardly visible to have access to public accommodations with their service dogs. Service dog access is especially important because symptoms of PTSD can often manifest themselves in public. While pets and therapy animals can provide some of the benefits I have just described, a service dog that is trained to perform specific actions and has full public access can provide effective animal-assisted interventions whenever and wherever they are needed.

H.R. 4764 also calls for veterans to “see a physician who is a primary care provider or mental health care provider at a Department of Veterans Affairs medical facility at least quarterly.” It is worth noting that doctors are familiar with and supportive

of animal-assisted interventions. In 2014, HABRI commissioned a survey of 1,000 general practitioners and found that 69% of doctors have worked with animals in a hospital, medical center, or medical practice. 88% of doctors saw improvement in patients' physical conditions and 97% saw improvement in patients' mental health conditions as a result of interaction with animals. These numbers indicate that doctors are likely to be supportive partners in this important program.

To conclude, a growing body of research demonstrates widespread positive mental health impacts from the human-animal bond that should be taken into consideration when shaping public health policy, both in relation to H.R. 4764 and beyond.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today and I hope that the members of the Subcommittee will rely on HABRI as a resource. With PTSD affecting more than 250,000 post 9-11 war veterans, VA support for service animals is the best way to ensure that every veteran with PTSD has access to the beneficial impact of the human-animal bond. HR 4764 is a strong step in the right direction, and HABRI offers its full support for this pilot program.

I would also like to thank you, Chairman DeSantis, for your service, your leadership and your commitment to supporting our veterans.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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- ⁱ Service Dogs, A Rule by the Veterans Affairs Department, Federal Register. September 5, 2012. Web. <<https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2012/09/05/2012-21784/service-dogs#h-10>>.
- ⁱⁱ O'Haire ME, Guérin NA and Kirkham AC. "Animal-Assisted Intervention for trauma: a systematic literature review." *Front. Psychol.* 6:1121. (2015). Web. 1 Apr. 2016. <<http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01121/full>>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Hosey, Geoff, and Vicky Melfi. "Human-Animal Interactions, Relationships and Bonds: A Review and Analysis of the Literature." *International Journal of Comparative Psychology* 27.1 (2014): 117-47. EScholarship. University of California, 2014. Web. 1 Apr. 2016. <<http://eprints.cdlib.org/uc/item/6955n8kd#page-1>>.
- ^{iv} Beetz, Andrea et al. "Psychosocial and Psychophysiological Effects of Human-Animal Interactions: The Possible Role of Oxytocin." *Frontiers in Psychology* 3 (2012): 234. PMC. Web. 4 Apr. 2016.
- ^v Souter, Megan A., and Michelle D. Miller. "Do Animal-Assisted Activities Effectively Treat Depression? A Meta-Analysis." *Anthrozoos* 20.2 (2007): 167-80. *Taylor Francis Online*. Toutledge, 28 Apr. 2015. Web. 1 Apr. 2016. <<http://patastherapeutas.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Depressa%CC%83oMetaAnalise.pdf>>.
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- ^{vii} Wood L, Martin K, Christian H, Nathan A, Lauritsen C, Houghton S, et al. (2015) The Pet Factor - Companion Animals as a Conduit for Getting to Know People, Friendship Formation and Social Support. *PLoS ONE* 10(4): e0122085. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0122085



Biographical Summary for Steven Feldman

Steven Feldman is the Executive Director of the Human-Animal Bond Research Initiative (HABRI) Foundation. His mission is to advance the science that demonstrates the positive roles that companion animals play in the integrated health of individuals, families and communities.

Steven is an experienced public affairs advocate who has worked in the areas of wildlife conservation, animal welfare, healthcare and education. Prior to joining HABRI, Steve served as senior vice president for external affairs for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. He also worked at Powell Tate, a leading public affairs firm, and as a staff member in the United States Senate.

He holds a Bachelor's Degree in International Affairs and a Master's Degree in Political Management from the George Washington University.