

NEADS: The Local Nonprofit That Has A Nationwide Impact on Veterans

By Caitlin V. Reidy

NEADS World Class Service Dogs in Princeton, MA, has earned a nationwide reputation of providing exceptional assistance animals, specifically Labrador Retrievers, for clients with disabilities. In addition to patients with hearing loss and adults and children with physical, developmental, and mental health conditions, NEADS has special initiatives in place that help to provide service dogs to those who have served in the military.

According to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, also known as PTSD, can affect "11-20%" of veterans, and can vary on numerous factors, including the area in which they served. In addition to PTSD, other related disabilities related to service, such as physical and mobility conditions, affect millions of American veterans. This is something that NEADS has addressed in their service dog program. When veterans are matched with a NEADS dog, they receive the service animal at no personal cost.

"It's important for us [NEADS] to honor our commitment to veterans," Kathryn (Katie) Hanna, LTC US Army (Retired), Manager of Client Services for NEADS, stated. "As long as we can assess a client's needs, we serve nationwide- any state in this country."

LTC Hanna stated that NEADS receives federal funding to provide specialized veteran services, as well as coalitions in the local community,

to help address veterans' needs. In addition to receiving a free service dog through NEADS, veterans who have been honorably discharged from the military are able to receive pet insurance through Veterans Affairs.

As a retired Army veteran herself, LTC (Lieutenant Colonel) Hanna emphasized her own, personal, commitment to veteran assistance and aid. Coming from a military family, and with her husband still in the Army, LTC Hanna said that the hardest decision she ever made was resigning her commission.

LTC Hanna met her husband at the University of Iowa when both of them were going through Army ROTC (Reserves Officers' Training Corps). LTC Hanna was active duty for 11 years, but with four kids, she resigned her commission and went back into the Reserves in 2013 because she "missed her soldiers." During her tenure in the military, LTC Hanna's family was stationed in Germany, she was deployed to Kosovo, and her husband has served in Iraq.

Now fully retired from the Army while her husband continues to serve, LTC Hanna is committed to her role helping match service dogs with candidates at NEADS, which includes veterans in need of support. LTC Hanna stated that she interviews candidates, sometimes over Zoom, to help assess client needs. Clients then receive a "whole interview," whether it's online or in person,



Top Photo: Barry Estevez said that his NEADS Service Dog, Apollo "saved his life."

Courtesy Photos



Top Photo: LTC Hanna may be retired from the Army, but she still remains committed and devoted to veterans' advocacy through her work as Manager of Client Services.

Courtesy Photo

depending on their own mobility and hearing situation.

The process of "matching" dogs to clients is an intense, but worthwhile process. Clients are matched to their labs based on individual needs, expectations, and personalities of both parties.

"We purpose-breed our labs on [NEADS] campus," LTC Hanna stated. "Dogs are trained for two years and go through specialized instruction before they are matched with clients."

LTC Hanna stated that "most of NEADS dogs are trained by prison inmates" in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and that this setup is beneficial for the dogs, clients, and trainers.

"It has such a positive impact on everyone," LTC Hanna stated.

LTC Hanna stated that NEADS dogs have about a 50% fail rate, but when a puppy fails the program due to "temperament, health, or disabilities," they are adopted and come home partially-trained to their new families. She also stated that dogs who do pass know up to 50-60 tasks, are intensely trained in obedience and socialization, and can usually serve from 8-10 years.

"Our dogs are above and beyond, they're truly amazing," LTC Hanna stated. "The hardest part of this job is that we are not able to serve everyone, but we serve who we can."

One NEADS success story involves a service dog named Apollo and a veteran who has served both in Iraq and Afghanistan. Barry Estevez, a retired Army veteran who served for 23 years, stated that his NEADS dog, Apollo, "saved his life."

"Everytime you go to Iraq and Afghanistan, you leave a little bit of yourself behind in the desert," Mr.

Estevez said. "I loved the military, I loved every one of my days. I miss putting on my uniform. However, when I got home last time, I wasn't the same person."

Mr. Estevez stated that he started therapy at the Worcester Veterans' Center, and that he was recommended for NEADS. He met Apollo, his yellow Labrador Retriever, and said that he was a "goofy boy," during training, but also that he "saved his life."

"I never left my house after my last tour of Iraq," Mr. Estevez stated. "When I first got Apollo, I was able to go to Walmart as long as I had Apollo by my side."

Mr. Estevez stated that Apollo is "very attentive" and knows when a sound, sight, or smell will trigger him.

"In a blink of an eye, Apollo is there for me to pet him," Mr. Estevez conveyed. "NEADS dogs are life-saving dogs, especially when several veterans a day are committing suicide. Apollo is the most loving and attentive dog that anyone could ever have- he checks in on me all day."

NEADS World Class Service Dogs in Princeton is nothing short of spectacular in terms of their dogs, matching services, and the work that they do to provide individuals with the services they require. As a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, NEADS has been providing service dogs to individuals of all ages with hearing loss, autism, and other disabilities since 1976, and is sponsored by local organizations, as well as federally funded and recognized for the outreach, especially for veterans, that they provide. More information on how to volunteer, raise and train puppies, and inquire about service dogs can be found at their website, <https://www.neads.org/>.

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