

Gov. Rauner signs bill providing access to service dogs for veterans suffering from mental health difficulties

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MARION – Governor Bruce Rauner today signed HB 2897, legislation to increase access to service dogs for veterans through the Helping Paws Program. This expansion will add veterans to the program-eligibility pool and allow the training of service dogs to assist veterans with physical or mental health ailments.

Compared with the general population, the veteran population is at-risk for higher rates of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide. Partnership with a service dog can help alleviate stress and feelings of isolation as veterans transition back into civilian life.

“One of our most important duties as a society is ensuring that our veterans have access to services that improve their quality of life,” Gov. Rauner said. “Those who have served our state and country can face mental health challenges such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, and the Helping Paws service dog program will help provide the comfort and relief that our veterans deserve.”

The Helping Paws Program is run by the Illinois Department of Corrections at Logan Correctional Center, a prison for women. It is a vocational dog training program that has served Illinoisans for 17 years. Offenders have trained more than 300 dogs since the program began. Once they graduate, the dogs go on to assist people who are visually impaired, confined to wheelchairs, suffer from diabetes or epilepsy, and now will assist veterans with depression or PTSD. The program partners with Mid America Service Dogs’ Foundation and Paws Giving Independence. Veterans who participate in the program will be provided a service dog at no charge.

“It is our responsibility to take care of our veterans when they return home, and this small change will have a life-changing impact on the lives of those veterans who are struggling the most,” said Rep. Dave Severin (R-Benton). “I am excited to see HB 2897 signed into law, as it will surely have a positive impact on the lives of those who deserve our help.”

“Service dogs often can offer companionship, stress-relief and motivation to veterans who suffer from PTSD or depression that friends and family can’t provide,” Sen. Andy Manar (D- Decatur) said. “I am pleased that these veterans now are on the list of people in Illinois who can take advantage of the Helping Paws Service Dog Program and lead more fulfilling lives.”