

## ABSTRACT

### **A Proposal from the Psychiatric Service Dog Society: Introducing Psychiatric Service Dogs to Japan<sup>1</sup>**

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Psychiatric Service Dog partnership when used in conjunction with psychotropic medication and talk therapy facilitates the cultivation of insight by the handler into her unique manifestations of mental illness. By virtue of 24/7 partnership, the dog becomes an astute observer of its handler's baseline behaviors, attitudes, and dispositions. When these shift as a result of physiologic changes in the handler, the dog responds naturally to these changes. Response behaviors are unique to each dog and handlers learn to recognize her dog's response behaviors over the course of time. In other words, the handler learns to 'read her dog'.

Such recognition on the part of the handler leads to greater somatic awareness such as, "Whenever my dog leans into my legs, it means that I am beginning to hyper-ventilate, and I am on my way to having a panic attack" or, "My dog looks at me in a very specific way when I am driving aggressively in an irritable hypo-manic state. That's when I know that I should get off the road as soon as possible." Such an 'early warning system' provides a handler with timely information so that she may more effectively modulate her behavior, engage cognitive behavioral skills, take 'prn' medication, or phone her doctor for guidance. Many Psychiatric Service Dog handlers casually refer to their dogs as 'Suicide Prevention Dogs'.

In the United States, Psychiatric Service Dogs are afforded the same legal rights to access as are Guide Dogs, Hearing Dogs, and Service Dogs for persons with mobility impairments. As such, Psychiatric Service Dogs are trained to function appropriately in public spaces where animals are normally not allowed to go. Since there are very few schools in the U.S. that train Psychiatric Service Dogs, our laws allow mentally ill individuals to train their own. The process of training one's own Service Dog conditions the handler to a behavioral mindset and sensitizes her to 'cause and effect' relationships in her environment, interpersonal interactions, and with her dog. Such a behaviorist mind-set combined with human-canine partnership facilitates insight, diminishes symptoms, restores functioning, and increases independence among handlers.

The Psychiatric Service Dog Society has pioneered the use of Psychiatric Service Dogs in the United States for the past ten years. Research conducted by the Society shows that handlers report fewer refractory symptoms and decreased medication usage subsequent to Psychiatric Service Dog partnership. This innovative rehabilitative tool appears to work especially well with those suffering from Anxiety Disorders and Mood Disorders, in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> Abstract book for 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Human-Animal Interactions (IAHAIO) Tokyo, Japan, October 5-8, 2007, p. 123.