

The Psychiatric Society of Virginia
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Psychiatric Service Dogs

- A patient does not leave her home, because she is fearful of having a panic attack in public.
- A patient becomes suspicious when her husband suggests that she may be getting manic
- A child with Asperger's syndrome has difficulty interacting with peers

What do these three scenarios have in common? The symptoms experienced by these patients may be mitigated through ongoing partnership with a Psychiatric Service Dog (PSD). Like guide dogs, PSD are a type of service animal trained to perform tasks that mitigate the functional impairments associated with psychiatric disability.

What tasks might a PSD perform for the individuals described, above? For panic disorder, a PSD may be trained to alert his handler to incipient panic attacks. This advance notice affords the handler the opportunity to get to a safe and private location, in order to wait-out the attack. Similarly, some PSD may be trained to alert to incipient mania in their bipolar handler. This critical information cues the at times incredu-

lous bipolar handler to take antipsychotic medication, call her doctor, and/or make pre-emptive behavioral choices. For children with Asperger's a PSD may be trained to facilitate social interactions with peers. Children are naturally drawn to dogs and enjoy asking questions of those who handle them.

Psychiatric Service Dogs are a novel therapeutic adjunct intended to be used in combination with ongoing medication and talk therapy. They are a cognitive tool aimed at developing the patient's level of insight, which in turn facilitates their ability to make healthier behavioral choices at critical moments. The PSD partnership is a 24/7 lifestyle commitment, and one must work the program, in order to reap the benefits. This involves being an active participant in the selection and training of the dog, involving one's clinicians in their use of the dog, and participating in an online service dog community in order to learn about relevant laws and for ongoing peer support.

The Arlington-based Psychiatric Service Dog Society is a 501(c)3 organization devoted

to educational outreach to prospective PSD handlers, mental health practitioners and members of the business community. PSDS is preparing to conduct peer-reviewed clinical research on the efficacy of PSD and will implement its first trial on patients with panic disorder next year. PSDS is also developing training modules for use with the professional dog trainer community, in order to build capacity for a new cadre of qualified trainers capable of working with mental health clients.

What can you do to support your patient's decision to begin using a PSD? Visit our website and download our providers' brochure to become educated about PSD. Write your patient a letter of support so that she can begin training her dog responsibly, in places of public accommodation. The PSDS website provides model language for such a letter that balances the interests of clinicians and patients, alike. Finally, stay tuned as there is certainly more to come!

Psychiatric Service Dog Society

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