

# By MySide

I M A G I N E T H E P O S S I B L E .

**COMMUNITY GUIDE**





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# OVERVIEW

**“When the peace treaty is signed, the war isn’t over for the veterans, or the family. It’s just starting.”**

— Karl Marlantes, Author,  
Vietnam War Veteran,  
U.S. Marine Corps



## ABOUT THE FILM

**BY MY SIDE** is an intimate documentary portrait of three veterans suffering from the “invisible wound,” post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the most prevalent unhealed injury veterans suffer. Approximately 20% of those who served in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars are still haunted by visions, chased by enemies they can never outrun, and tortured by the fear that they themselves are the enemy. The three veterans and their families bravely share their pain, fear, and the difficult realization that they’ve lost time and that they may never return to being the people they were before. All three found hope in a place they hadn’t expected—in the heart of a faithful service dog. Through intimate interviews with the veterans’ families and revealing footage of the veterans bonding with their service animals, the film demonstrates how wo/man’s best friend can provide powerful support that helps mitigate the psychic scars imprinted on those who have served our country.

## USING THIS COMMUNITY GUIDE

The **BY MY SIDE** Community Guide is a tool to facilitate dialogue, address the needs of veterans, and better educate audiences about the role service dogs can play in saving veterans’ lives. The resources included invite opportunities to be together in community, learn from one another, and offset our nation’s reluctance to face and treat PTSD and the continued increase in veteran suicide.

The content is intended to be flexible and adaptable for multiple audiences and settings, from theaters to community screenings to classrooms. You may choose to use the entire guide or select sections to support your screening and engagement goals. Remember that this content, which may be familiar to some but new to others, is here to support all audiences as they gather to learn, discuss, and reflect on the needs of veterans today.

## LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

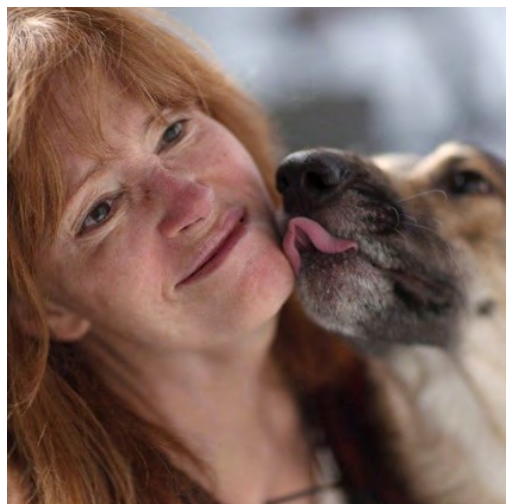
Back in 2010, I heard Gloria Gilbert Stoga, founder of Puppies Behind Bars, being interviewed on [Fresh Air](#) about partnering inmate-trained dogs with veterans suffering from PTSD. It was life-changing. I realized three things: I didn't know the meaning of PTSD or what a service dog was, and I didn't know anyone who had served in the Iraq or Afghanistan wars. For my generation, the draft brought the Vietnam War into our homes. There was no talk of post-combat trauma then and no dogs to help heal those wounds. Had we, I wondered, finally learned something about the psychic cost of war? I was intrigued enough to travel to New York City to attend a [Puppies Behind Bars](#) graduation ceremony. As prisoner-trained dogs were partnered with veterans in need, the sense of gratitude and hope was palpable and sometimes overwhelming. Profound forces were being unleashed. I knew immediately this would be my next journey.

A couple years later, I met a professional dog trainer, Mary Cortani. As a veteran, Mary knew there were thousands of veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq with debilitating mental health wounds that were not responding to standard treatments. She also knew those "invisible wounds" were the cause of 22 veterans taking their lives every day. Mary founded [Operation Freedom Paws](#) to teach veterans how to train a dog that could help them navigate the dark times and find joy again. With Mary's go-ahead, I began photographing veterans on this interspecies recovery path for my multimedia project called [HEAL!](#), which chronicles the healing journeys of veterans living with post-traumatic stress and other disabilities who seek to cope day-to-day with the help of their highly trained service dogs.

Every veteran's story and struggle is compounded by collateral damage suffered by their family. Over time, I recognized my childhood as being reflected in their stories. My father was a U.S. Army veteran who flew missions as a tail gunner during WWII. He, too, arrived home with deep, invisible wounds that had no name or treatment. As I listened to veterans, their spouses, and their children talk about life after combat, I came to understand that, like them, my Dad was wrestling with PTSD, and that is what led to his anger and alcoholism. I also realized this is an essential facet of the veteran experience that needed to be told: the role of the family.

**BY MY SIDE** unveils another invisible truth—military veterans account for less than 1% of the American population—throwing a spotlight on the valor and sacrifice that so few have made for so many. **BY MY SIDE** celebrates our veterans and their love of country and family. It celebrates their beautiful families who love them. And shows how and why service dogs—who match the veterans' loyalty and commitment—can heal broken hearts and quiet the wars within. That is the message our veterans and their families want others to know. There is hope, and it can be found on the end of a leash.

— Vicki Topaz, Director



# BEFORE SCREENING



## MODERATOR TIPS



### PREPARE YOURSELF

- » **Reflect upon how the documentary touches your own life.** Watch the film and read through this guide before your event. Give yourself time to reflect so you are not dealing with your raw emotions while trying to moderate a conversation.
- » **Be knowledgeable.** You don't need to be an expert on PTSD, veterans' issues, or service dogs to lead a thoughtful community conversation. Reading through this guide and familiarizing yourself with the issues it raises can help you prepare.
- » **Be clear about your role.** The primary responsibility of a moderator is to keep the conversation moving forward while staying grounded in your event goals.



### PREPARE THE GROUP

- » **Focus on inclusion:** Ensure your screening event is open and inviting to people from different backgrounds and physical abilities. One way to do this is to collaborate and co-create the event with local groups and organizations serving people of color, veterans' organizations, disabled people, or other priority stakeholders.
- » **Encourage active listening:** Listen to understand and assume good intentions while also recognizing that your words have an impact. Ask audience members to allow one another to complete their thoughts without interruption and follow up with clarifying questions if necessary. The intention of your event is likely not to change minds but to inform and support.
- » **Invite in content leaders:** Consider bringing in respected professionals who can speak before or after the film, serve on a panel, and offer a unique perspective on the subject. If available, any of the veterans or other individuals in **BY MY SIDE**, along with the director and film advisors, are also eager to attend. Contact the team [here](#).
- » **Anticipate multiple perspectives:** The film delves into sensitive issues, including trauma, sexual abuse, suicide, and violence. Remind audience members that everyone will walk in with different experiences and points of view. Invite them to share their perspectives using "I" statements, like "I think..." or "I believe..." rather than "Everyone knows..."

- » **Words matter:** Clarity in word choice is a part of clarity in thinking, which is one objective of the **BY MY SIDE** screenings. For example:
  - » “PTSD” is sometimes misused to describe the negative effects of any difficult experience or event. Be mindful, sensitive, and thoughtful about what is and isn’t PTSD.
  - » The term “**service dogs**” refers specifically to dogs that have been trained and are used to support veterans and others with PTSD, other invisible wounds, and mobility disabilities. (See Frequently Asked Questions, pages 11-13 in this guide, for a more extensive definition.)

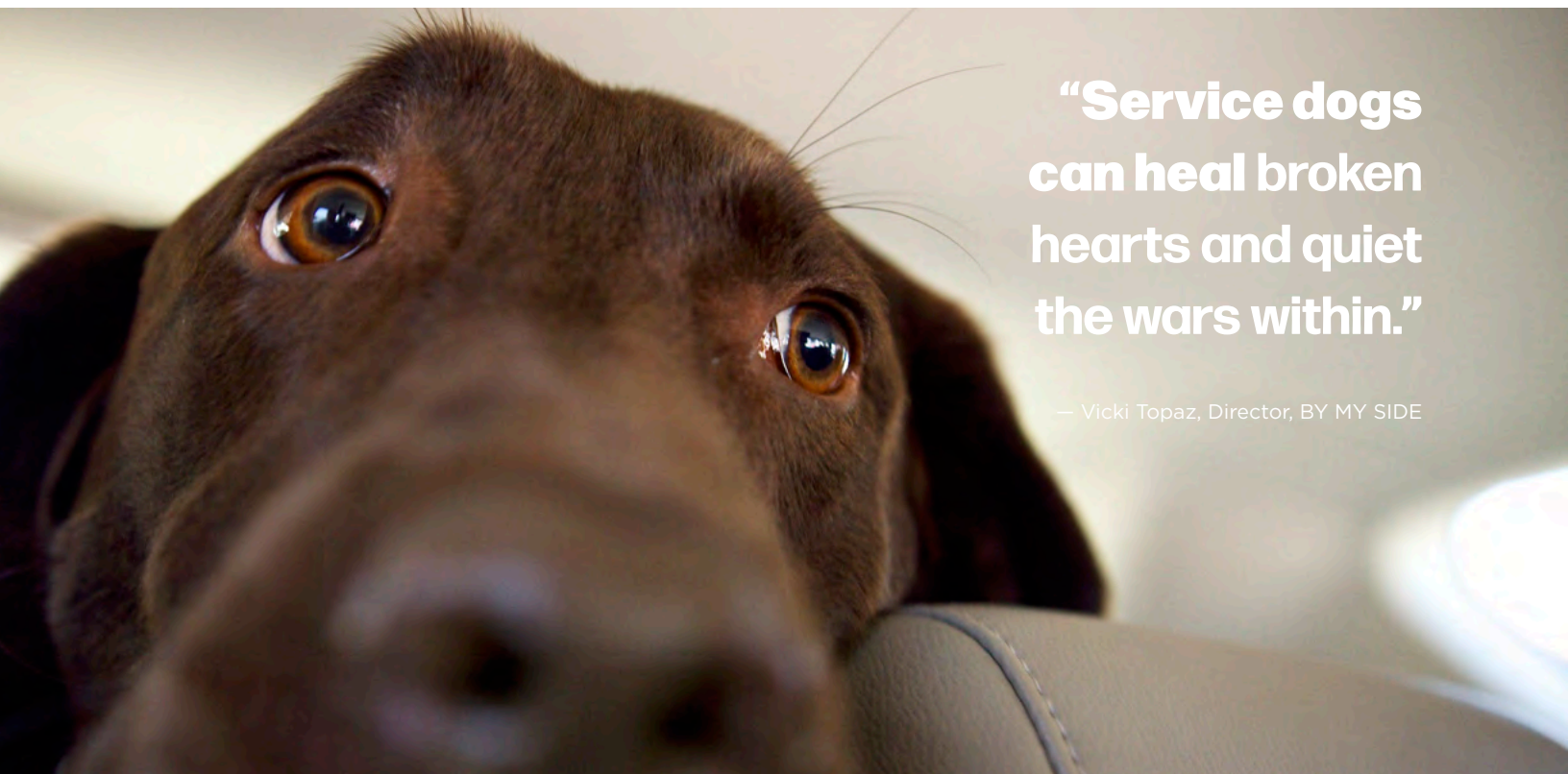


## PREPARE THE GROUP

- » The experiences and stories of the veterans included in the film are emotionally difficult and can be potentially triggering. It is important to open your screening by acknowledging the sensitive nature of the content. Here is one way to do so:

**“BY MY SIDE contains discussions and sharing of sensitive content, including suicide, sexual assault, and combat. Please take care of yourself and support one another with this in mind.”**

- » We recommend inviting local organizations that support veterans or are skilled in working with individuals living with PTSD to your screening. If they are unavailable, please remind your audience that support is out there, and make visible crisis resources such as [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#) or the [National Center for PTSD](#) if this level of support is needed.



**“Service dogs  
can heal broken  
hearts and quiet  
the wars within.”**

— Vicki Topaz, Director, BY MY SIDE

## CHECKLIST AND TIMELINE

Planning a screening event is a powerful opportunity to unite the community to raise awareness and inspire compassionate action. Follow this suggested schedule to prepare for a successful event.



### TWO MONTHS PRIOR

- Set a time, date, and location. Ensure that the location is accessible for everyone.
- Build an outreach list of organizations and secure partnerships for the event.
- Decide on the formats for your screening and post-screening conversation. (See format suggestions in Goals and Format)
- Brainstorm potential panelists for a post-screening conversation.



### ONE MONTH PRIOR

- Send out invitations with time, date, location, RSVP details, and a description of the film and post-screening conversation.
- If hosting a panel, ensure speakers are familiar with the film and clear about expectations for the post-screening conversation.
- Connect with community partners and discuss having tables where additional information will be available.



### DAY(S) BEFORE

- Send reminders to guests and speakers.
- Test all equipment at the site, both projection and audio.
- Assemble any promotional materials and remind partners to bring materials for informational tables.



### DAY OF SCREENING

- Arrive at least an hour early. This allows enough time to set up the room, test all equipment, greet guests and panelists, and review your agenda.

## GOALS AND FORMAT

**BY MY SIDE** tells a story of hope and possibility for veterans living with PTSD. The film can have a major impact on any viewer and provide an enlightened space to meet these goals:

- » **Engage in meaningful discussions** to break the stigma surrounding mental health and veteran PTSD and moral injury across all communities
- » **Increase awareness** about the life-saving work service dogs do to support individuals and veterans living with PTSD and the families that love them
- » **Address the epidemic** of veteran suicide with dialogue, support, and greater use of service dogs
- » **Advance public support, legislation, and training programs** to increase the access to and availability of service dogs for veterans and others living with PTSD

In thinking about how to use the film, consider your intended audience. Suggested audiences include:

- » **veteran groups and organizations**
- » **social workers and mental health providers**
- » **general community screenings**
- » **campus, youth, and educational screenings**
- » **college or university screenings**
- » **faith-based gatherings**
- » **national, state, and local conferences or conventions**
- » **public policy forums on veteran's affairs**

Once you've focused on a particular audience, you can determine your appropriate partners and the objectives for your screening and dialogue.

**BY MY SIDE** is a 30-minute documentary short. We highly encourage you to show the film in its entirety as the foundation for any event, and then use the post-screening questions to guide a discussion, which can take three forms:



### SCREENING + Q&A

- » Share some of the background on PTSD and the role of service dogs provided in the guide, and lead an audience Q & A.



### SCREENING + PANEL

- » Host a panel with cast members (if available), representatives from local veteran groups, mental health groups, and service dog organizations, followed by an audience Q & A.



### SCREENING + WORKSHOP

- » Return to one or more scenes from **BY MY SIDE** to emphasize a theme you want to discuss. Alternatively, choose several quotes in the guide selected from the film to introduce an idea or question for personal reflection, journaling, or discussion.



# BACKGROUND

## WHO'S WHO IN BY MY SIDE



### **Ramon Reyes & service dog Huey**

Veteran, U.S. Army  
Monique Reyes, Ramon's wife  
IzaBella Reyes, Ramon's daughter,  
and service dog Luna  
Johnny Reyes, Ramon's son



### **Kim Fitzpatrick-Voss & service dog Artemis (aka Moose)**

Veteran, U.S. Army  
Tamara Voss, Kim's wife



### **Emilio Gallegos & service dog Samson**

Veteran, U.S. Marine Corps,  
Purple Heart recipient  
Emilio Gallegos, Jr., Emilio's son  
Seryna Gallegos, Emilio's daughter



### **Mary Cortani**

Veteran, U.S. Army  
Founder/Director,  
[Operation Freedom Paws](#)



### **Meg Daley Olmert**

Director of Research,  
[Warrior Canine Connection](#)  
Author, *Made for Each Other: The Biology of the Human-Animal Bond*  
Science advisor,  
[The BIG FIX Uganda](#)



### **Jeremy Ramirez, DrPH, MPH**

Veteran, U.S. Army  
Research scientist,  
Johns Hopkins University

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT PTSD

### WHAT IS PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is different for every person. It is a mental health problem that typically develops after a life-threatening event. The leading cause of PTSD is combat-related exposure and the second leading cause is military sexual trauma (MST), followed by traumatic brain injury (TBI), but anyone can develop PTSD at any age.

PTSD was first named in 1980 by the American Psychiatric Association. [\*The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders\*](#) (the DSM), the handbook used by healthcare professionals to reference the diagnosis of mental disorders, classifies PTSD as a mental disorder. (Adapted from [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs](#)). PTSD has not always had the same name. In the Civil War it was called soldier's heart; during WWI it was shell shock; in WWII, battle fatigue; in the Vietnam War, post-Vietnam syndrome.

Certain types of trauma, like combat or sexual assault, increase the likelihood of developing PTSD. Personal factors, such as age and gender and what happens after the trauma, can all affect its course. While over half of the general population experiences trauma of some kind, veterans experience a higher rate of PTSD.

- » **7–8% of the population will have PTSD at some point in their lives**
- » **An estimated 13 million adults have PTSD in a given year. (This is only a small portion of those who have experienced trauma.)**
- » **In the United States, motor vehicle accidents are actually one of the leading causes of PTSD.**

Of the roughly 2.7 million United States military personnel deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan post-9/11, up to 23% return with diagnostic symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, but symptoms can sometimes take years to emerge. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recognizes three qualifying conditions for receiving treatment — traumatic brain injury (TBI), military sexual trauma (MST), and PTSD.

In other words, you do not need to be in a war zone or in combat to be vulnerable to developing PTSD. The wide range of traumatic experiences is critical to remember as you discuss PTSD within your communities. No matter what, emphasize these principles:

- » **You are not alone.**
- » **Help is available.**
- » **This is not about weakness.**
- » **You deserve to heal and recover from the invisible, psychological wounds of trauma as much as you deserve the best care for the physical wounds of trauma.**



## WHAT IS TRAUMA?

According to the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMSHA\)](#), trauma is an emotional or physical response to one or more physically harmful or life-threatening events or circumstances with lasting adverse effects on your mental and physical well-being. This could be an event you've experienced, witnessed happening to someone else, heard about happening to a close loved one, or heard about [through your job](#) (e.g., first responder, social worker, therapist).

## WHY DO SOME PEOPLE USE THE TERM PTSD WHILE OTHERS USE PTS OR PTSI?

As research on PTSD evolves, mental health professionals are increasingly using post-traumatic stress (PTS) or post-traumatic stress injury (PTSI) as the preferred term. This shift supports efforts to de-stigmatize trauma-related injuries by not labeling them as a disorder. Recent findings have shown that the new terms may help eliminate perceived stigma and encourage those living with the condition to seek out treatment. Learn about this research [here](#).

## WHO DEVELOPS PTSD?

Some veterans had experienced trauma before they became service members, and their time in the military added additional trauma, resulting in what's known as complex post-traumatic stress. Other veterans developed PTSD due to sexual assault or other trauma that occurred prior to or while serving.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF PTSD?

Usually, symptoms of PTSD arise soon after the traumatic event but may also appear months or years later. There are four types of PTSD symptoms:

- » **Re-experiencing** includes flashbacks of and reliving a traumatic event, and can involve physical symptoms such as a racing heart or sweating, bad dreams, or recurring frightening thoughts.
- » **Avoidance** includes avoiding thoughts, feelings, places, activities, or objects reminiscent of the traumatic event.
- » **Arousal and reactivity** includes being easily startled, feeling tense, having trouble sleeping.
- » **Cognition and mood changes** can include negative thoughts, feelings of guilt or blame, or loss of interest in hobbies.

When these symptoms last for a month or longer, it is considered PTSD.

## WHAT IS MORAL INJURY?

[The Moral Injury Project at Syracuse University](#) defines moral injury as the damage done to one's conscience when that person perpetrates, witnesses, or fails to prevent acts that transgress one's own moral beliefs, values, or ethical codes of conduct. Moral injury can emerge from military service, but it is not isolated to military service. The effects of moral injury include lasting emotional, psychological, social, and behavioral expectations of self and others, and the severity of trauma that causes PTSD is likely to cause moral injury as well. In **BY MY SIDE**, veterans share their feelings of betrayal while serving, which suggests a deep violation of moral conscience and disruption in an individual's confidence in and expectations of their role as a soldier.

## WHAT IS AN "INVISIBLE" INJURY?

An invisible post-military injury can include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), operational stress, mild traumatic brain injury (TBI), military sexual trauma (MST), and major depression.

## WHAT IS SECONDARY PTSD?

Secondary PTSD arises in individuals who are exposed to others' ongoing trauma. While not an official diagnosis in the DSM, secondary PTSD can arise in professional settings or at home.

**"Me and Johnny were afraid to play and laugh because he was always so mad. So I thought I was really just misbehaving, I thought I was just like not doing anything right."**

— IzaBella Reyes, Ramon's daughter,  
BY MY SIDE

**"When he came back, it got really ugly really fast. He would thrash around in bed and moan and whimper, and so I knew that something was going on. There would be nights that he would lay in bed all night with his eyes wide open, and he wouldn't sleep until the sun came up."**

— Monique Reyes, Ramon's wife, BY MY SIDE

# SERVICE DOGS 101

## WHAT ARE SERVICE DOGS?

A service dog is highly trained to address the emotional and medical needs of a specific person on the recommendation of a doctor. They pay close attention to their person and take care of them. Service dogs are protected with legal access rights under the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) (1990). Not every dog can be a service dog. It is important to respect the relationship between the service dog and their handler at all times.

**“You can’t just hide your feelings and emotions because these darn dogs, they know. They can smell it, they can feel it, but she knows that I am her partner and I am her job. She understands that her place is with me everywhere I go.”**

— Kim Fitzpatrick-Voss, Veteran, U.S. Army, BY MY SIDE

## WHEN AND WHERE DID USING SERVICE DOGS FOR VETERANS BEGIN?

Dogs have assisted humans throughout history, but the modern conception of a working dog emerged following World War I, with a proliferation of soldiers blinded by mustard gas at the front lines.<sup>1</sup> The training of dogs for the blind mainly took place in Europe until 1928 when Morris Frank<sup>2</sup> brought Buddy, a trained German Shepherd, to New York. The second iteration of the working dog emerged in 1969 with the training of dogs for the deaf. A young woman named Linda Pritchard worked with a professional trainer to encourage her German Shepherd Skippy’s tendency to alert her to sounds.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.igdf.org.uk/guide-dogs/history-of-guide-dogs>

<sup>2</sup> <https://vimeo.com/568841913/83dd5446f2>

<sup>3</sup> <https://assistancedogsinternational.org/blog/2021/07/27/general/paving-the-way-to-wellbeing-the-first-nationally-recognized-assistance-dogs>

EST.

**“There are so many different ways a service dog is a lifeline. It’s tethering them to the here and the now—a reconnection to family, unconditional love. Having learned to trust a service dog, the world begins to open up again.”**

— Mary Cortani, Veteran, U.S. Army, BY MY SIDE

The first “service dog,” as we think of it today, emerged in 1975. The story goes that Dr. Bonita (Bonnie) Bergin had been traveling the world, especially South Asia and Turkey, and found people with mobility disabilities using donkeys and burros to aid in their mobility. Upon returning home, Dr. Bergin wondered what could be done for people with disabilities in the U.S. “I just sat there, and I have to tell you, I just went: dogs! Dogs could do this.”<sup>4</sup> Dr. Bergin trained the golden-lab cross Abdul to assist a multiple amputee in living a more independent life; he learned tasks such as picking up objects and turning on lights. She eventually founded Canine Companions for Independence (CCI). The organization aimed to promote independence for people who have disabilities.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Bergin eventually founded an accredited college for dog training called the Bergin College of Canine Studies.<sup>6</sup>

As service dog organizations expanded, six hearing dog organizations and CCI decided to band together to promote standards of excellence, calling themselves Assistance Dogs International (ADI).<sup>7</sup> Today, service dog organizations go through a several year, rigorous process of accreditation with ADI.<sup>8</sup> There are several benefits to participating in ADI, including receiving “Dog of Record” benefits for veterinary expenses from the Veterans Affairs (VA).<sup>9</sup> ADI is also participating in a five-year VA pilot project implemented in 2021 called Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers Act (PAWS Act).<sup>10</sup>

The service dog industry took a turn in 1990 with the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This act regulated service dogs for the first time and promoted the use of mobility and hearing dogs. The 2020 updated version explains that service animals are dogs trained to “work or perform tasks” for people with disabilities. These dogs must be allowed to enter public places, but the ADA puts restrictions on private property.<sup>11</sup> The ADA is quite vague about what counts as a service dog, leading to a wide variety of organizations that promote various techniques.

Even though the medical field has recognized post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) since the 1980 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-III (DSM-III),<sup>12</sup> the first service dog trained for PTSD came in 2006. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, there was a proliferation of organizations that trained service dogs for veterans with PTSD. Trainers found themselves suddenly responding to a need for service dogs for veterans who had experienced trauma while deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the popularity of PTSD dogs grew, veterans from earlier wars, like Vietnam, also sought out service dogs for their long-undiagnosed PTSD. As required by the ADA, these dogs are trained to do tasks for their disabled handler, such as alerting them to anxiety, creating space in public, retrieving medications, waking from nightmares, or deep pressure therapy (DPT), where the dog applies pressure much like a weighted blanket.

A second accreditation organization emerged in 2016 that focuses specifically on service dogs for veterans. The Association of Service Dog Providers for Military Veterans (ASDPMV) “is a coalition of non-profit service dog providers for military Veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, and military sexual trauma working to prevent suicide and improve military veterans’ mental health.” Much like the ADI, ASDPMV holds its members to high standards and works to expand awareness of service dogs’ impact on veterans with PTSD.<sup>13</sup> Despite the incentives to join ADI or ASDPMV, most not-for-profit organizations that train service dogs for veterans remain independent.

*(This summary was generously written by Jay Henderson)*

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LR4j\\_t521dI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LR4j_t521dI)

<sup>5</sup> <https://canine.org/about/who-we-are>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.berginu.edu>

<sup>7</sup> <https://assistancedogsinternational.org>

<sup>8</sup> <https://assistancedogsinternational.org/members/membership>

<sup>9</sup> <https://assistancedogsinternational.org/members/member-benefits>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/03/30/2022-06735/implementation-of-the-paws-for-veterans-therapy-act>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ada.gov/resources/service-animals-2010-requirements>

<sup>12</sup> <http://traumadissociation.com/ptsd/history-of-post-traumatic-stress-disorder.html#diagnostic>

<sup>13</sup> <http://servicedogs4vets.org/our-mission>

## WHAT IS THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SERVICE DOGS?

Meg Daley Olmert explains the brain science of service dogs in **BY MY SIDE**:

*The brain chemistry and wiring that promotes social behavior for all social mammals look most alike in humans and dogs. They are most like us in the brain systems of friendship.*

*The neurohormone oxytocin sits at the center of what we now know as our social brain network, and it's essential to the survival of all social mammals. A dog can read our mind through sight, smell, and interpretation of our body language. They can read us like a book. That makes them good partners. They respond very empathetically to us because of this oxytocin brain system that they have that's so similar to ours.*

*Looking into our dog's eyes when we come home and that tail's wagging and you're brushing them, and you're saying, "Hello, hello, hello. I'm happy to see you, too." The sight, the sound, the smell, the touch, all of that interaction is releasing the brain chemistry of bonding. That is also the brain chemistry of anti-stress, and so we relax.*

Several recent studies have shown that service dogs have a small but significant effect on the experience of veterans with PTSD.<sup>14</sup> A recent study led by Dr. Jeremy Ramirez at Johns Hopkins University found that service dogs improved symptoms of PTSD, which was demonstrated by a significant decrease in the self-assessment used to measure PTSD severity.<sup>15</sup>

## HOW DO SERVICE DOGS HELP VETERANS AND OTHER INDIVIDUALS WITH PTSD?

**"Samson has softened my dad's heart. I know he has worked through many things, and I see it in the day-to-day. Working on his patience, working on his love. It's not easy sometimes as a man to connect with your father, so I think Samson's also softened my heart a little bit, restoring my relationship with my father."**

— Emilio Gallegos, Jr., BY MY SIDE

**"Huey's the center of attention. It makes people come up and talk to me. I prefer they stay away. But in a way, it's good because I talk more."**

— Ramon Reyes, Veteran, U.S. Army, BY MY SIDE

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5788288>

<sup>15</sup> Ramirez, J. (2023). [Doctoral dissertation].

While research on the neurological benefits of service dogs is ongoing, we know that the following effects are experienced by their handlers:

- » **Stress reduction.** Through positive and emotionally supportive interactions with their service dog, a handler's brain can release oxytocin, a hormone associated with bonding and stress reduction.
- » **Regulate cortisol.** Oxytocin helps the levels of the stress hormone cortisol stay low. When elevated, cortisol can negatively affect the brain, including impaired cognitive function and memory.
- » **Help remain in the present.** Engaging with the dog in tasks or simply petting them can shift a person's focus away from negative thoughts or emotions, providing temporary relief and allowing the brain to recalibrate.
- » **Enhance social interaction.** Service dogs are a welcome focus for attention. They help act as a social bridge by facilitating interactions, which reduces isolation.
- » **Provide emotional support.** Many service dogs are trained to recognize and respond to signs of emotional distress in their handlers, such as anxiety or panic attacks. They can provide comfort and reassurance, which can help to regulate emotional responses and calm the brain during stressful situations.
- » **Help sustain a daily routine and structure.** Caring for a service dog requires a structured routine, which can help stabilize mood and reduce symptoms of conditions like depression and anxiety.

## CAN I PET A SERVICE DOG? AND OTHER THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND.

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Raising awareness and understanding of the role of service dogs in public spaces is one of the most important outcomes for any **BY MY SIDE** screening event.

Emilio shared in a conversation after the completion of the documentary that one of the most challenging parts of having a service dog is that most people don't know the purpose and role of service dogs in a veteran's life.

Keep in mind these parameters when you encounter a veteran or anyone who has a service dog. Remember these parameters:

- » **It's okay to ask.** Always ask the service dog handler before petting a dog.
- » **It's okay to thank a veteran for their service.** But don't ask what happened to them or why they have a service dog.
- » **Use the term "service dog."** A service dog is not a canine companion, a therapy dog, or an emotional support dog. Service dogs and their handlers have trained together in specific programs that set them apart.

See the [ADA FAQs](#) and explore the ADA requirements for service dogs [here](#).

## HOW CAN I GET A SERVICE ANIMAL?

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If you want a service dog and there are no providers in your community, contact either of these organizations for suggestions:

- » Association of Service Dog Providers for Military Veterans: <https://servicedogs4vets.org>
- » Assistance Dogs International: <https://assistancedogsinternational.org>



# WATCH AND DISCUSS THE FILM

## FOR CLASSROOMS AND COMMUNITIES



### PRE-SCREENING QUESTIONS

- » Are you familiar with the term post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)? If so, how would you define it?
- » Do you know the difference between trauma and PTSD?
- » Have you ever seen a service dog accompanying a veteran?
- » What questions would you like to ask the veteran about their service dog?



### POST-SCREENING QUESTIONS

- » If you were to pick one word or emotion to describe what you feel after watching the documentary, what would it be?
- » Mary Cortani shares with veterans in a training session, "You have an amazing gift at the end of the leash."
  - » How do you understand the "gift" of a service dog in a veteran's life and their family?
  - » If you have a service dog, how have they changed you and impacted your family?
- » What is one scene or moment in the film that stood out to you?
- » What did you see in **BY MY SIDE** that is particular to a veteran's life, and what are more universal ideas not specific to veterans?
- » In general, what new information did you learn about service dogs and the role they play with veterans living with PTSD?
- » How did you see PTSD impacting families? What did you learn about PTSD from the children and spouses of the veterans?
- » Jeremy Ramirez explains that there are barriers for veterans to receive this treatment despite service dogs becoming more visible. He shares, "It is a growing topic of conversation among veterans as they become more aware that service dogs are a potential treatment in helping them navigate their road to recovery, but there is no standard knowledge of how to access service dog assistance. The responsibility largely falls on our service dog training nonprofit community, and there is very little to no support offered by the VA."
  - » What ideas do you have to help mitigate these barriers?
- » What other challenges can you identify in having a service dog? How did veterans or their families navigate these challenges in **BY MY SIDE**?
- » How did you see a service dog help a veteran's family life?
  - » What was new or surprising about this?
- » Do you have any other questions about the role of service dogs in a veteran's life or in the life of their family?

## PANEL DISCUSSION AND Q&A

Convening local stakeholders for a panel discussion followed by a Q&A session is a reliable format for community conversations. Leaders of advocacy organizations, veterans groups, medical professionals, veterans, and other community stakeholders can help inform the community and offer a chance for multiple perspectives to be shared, respected, and heard in an open and safe format.

Providing a panel moderator is always helpful, given the emotions that may arise in conversations.

**When inviting panelists, consider their background and experience and how it can best align to your outreach goals.**

**Here are a few suggestions:**

- » A veteran and their service dog
- » A local representative from a veteran organization or the VA who has experience with the evidence-based therapies featured in the film
- » A representative of a relevant local service dog training organization



**Depending on the panelists, You should develop questions for the moderator to use to start the panel discussion. Here are a few sample questions to adapt:**

- » Please introduce yourself.
- » Describe the work you do, and tell us what inspired you to do it.
- » If relevant, what are some of the biggest challenges you face in your work in relation to PTSD?
- » What stigmas or misconceptions do you face in your work?
- » What did you find particularly relevant/helpful about the film?
- » How can people support/encourage a loved one who has suffered from trauma?
- » What local resources are there for finding help for oneself/one's loved one?
- » For veterans, what role can civilians/the general public play in healing and hope?

**If you can invite a veteran and their service dog, here are additional questions to include:**

- » What have you learned about yourself through your relationship with your service dog?
- » What advice would you give to other veterans struggling with PTSD today?
- » What has surprised you the most about your service dog?
- » What advice would you give other veterans considering a service dog or about to meet their service dog?



# STAY ENGAGED WITH NEXT STEPS

## GET THE HELP YOU NEED

### FOR ANYONE LIVING WITH PTSD

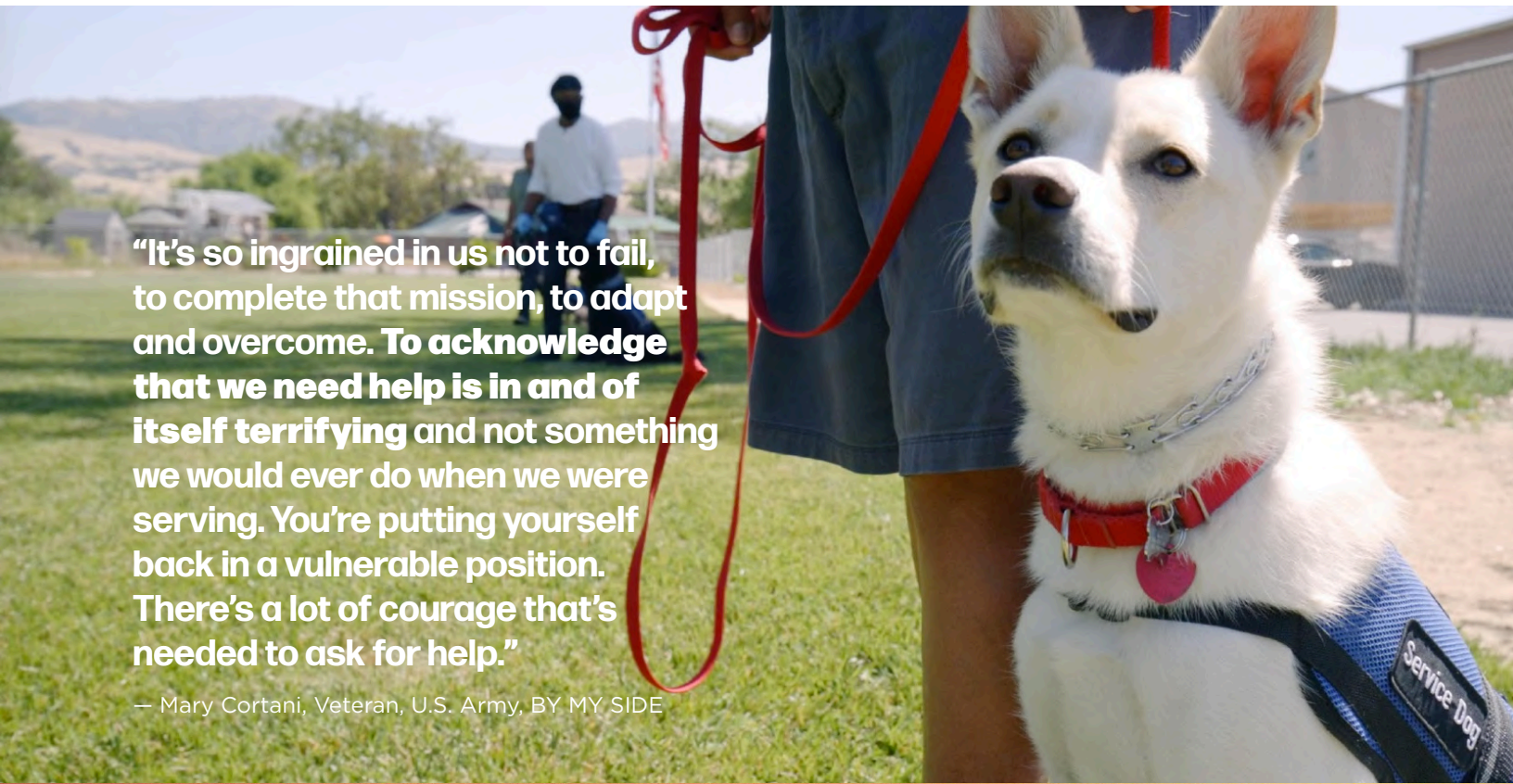
If you or a loved one are in crisis, get help now:

- Call 988 the [Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#) (24/7) or chat [here](#).
- Alternatively, and depending on the circumstances, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room.
- If you are a veteran, call 988 and press 1. You can also contact the [Veterans Crisis Line](#) (24/7), text 838255, or chat [here](#).
- The VA offers evidence-based PTSD treatment to veterans. For information on treatment programs, visit [Help for Veterans - PTSD: National Center for PTSD \(va.gov\)](#).

#### Ways to find a provider:

- [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/gethelp/find\\_therapist.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/gethelp/find_therapist.asp)
- [APA Psychologist Locator – American Psychological Association](#)
- More here: [How to Find a PTSD Therapist \(verywellmind.com\)](#)

*\*An additional note for veterans: As of January 2023, emergency mental health care is covered for all veterans, whether they are enrolled in the VA health care system and whether they visit a VA or non-VA health care facility.*



**“It’s so ingrained in us not to fail, to complete that mission, to adapt and overcome. To acknowledge that we need help is in and of itself terrifying and not something we would ever do when we were serving. You’re putting yourself back in a vulnerable position. There’s a lot of courage that’s needed to ask for help.”**

— Mary Cortani, Veteran, U.S. Army, BY MY SIDE

## FOR FAMILIES AND LOVED ONES

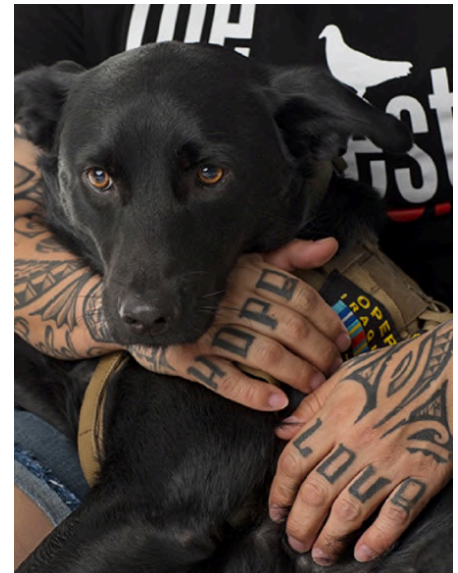
It is essential to ensure that a veteran's partners, spouses, and children also have access to resources and receive help. Often, they are the ones who help veterans connect to the information and resources they need.

### If your loved one is exhibiting symptoms of PTSD, or you are concerned:

- **Learn about PTSD.** This can help you understand what your loved one is going through.
- **Offer to attend medical appointments with them.** If your loved one is willing, this can help you understand and assist with treatment.
- **Let your loved one know you're willing to listen,** but you understand they don't want to talk. Do not force your loved one to talk about the trauma until they are ready.
- **Recognize that avoidance and withdrawal are part of the condition.** If your loved one resists your help, allow space and let them know that you're available when they are ready to accept your help.
- **Encourage participation.** Plan opportunities for activities with family and friends. Celebrate good events.
- **Make your health a priority.** Take care of yourself by eating healthy, being physically active, and getting enough rest. Take time alone or with friends, doing activities that help you recharge.
- **Seek help if you need it.** If you have difficulty coping, talk with your doctor. They may refer you to a therapist who can help you manage your stress.
- **Stay safe.** Plan a safe place for yourself and your children in case your loved one becomes violent or abusive.
- **Advocate for loved ones to seek treatment.**
  - » See [The National Center for PTSD](#)

### If you are concerned a friend or family member may be in crisis, check in by following [these five evidence-based steps](#).

- **Ask,** "Are you thinking about suicide?" communicates that you're open to speaking about suicide in a non-judgmental and supportive way. Read more [here](#).
- **Be there** in person, over the phone, or other ways to show support. Read more [here](#).
- **Help keep them safe.** Read more [here](#).
- **Help them connect** with 988 or other support networks. Read more [here](#).
- **Follow up** with a text, phone message, or a date to get together. Read more [here](#).



**“Hiding feelings that continuously make me numb to interactions and emotions. Floating in an ocean of doubt without anyone in sight, and I’m fighting to keep my head above water, and I hear my daughter say, ‘I love you,’ and my son says, ‘I need you.’ I can’t believe I let days turn to years of my children living in fear of their father. It bothers me to the depths of my soul, but I feel whole when the three of us are together, and I never want the day to end without them hearing me say, I love you.”**


— Emilio Gallegos, Veteran,  
U.S. Marine Corps, BY MY SIDE

## FOR MEDICAL AND SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

If you work with veterans in a support capacity, it is critical to practice self-care to provide the best care possible and avoid the emotional experiences of burnout, secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, or vicarious traumatization.

Here are resources to explore if you are in the medical field providing support for veterans and others living with PTSD:

- » [The VA Provider Self-Care Toolkit](#)
- » [SAMHSA's Self-Care for Healthcare Workers Modules](#)
- » [International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies](#)



**“I am alive  
today  
because of  
my service  
dog”**

— Jeremy Ramirez, DrPH, MPH  
Veteran, U.S. Army, BY MY SIDE

## SUPPORT THE USE OF SERVICE DOGS

Training and supporting veterans with service dogs takes resources — human and financial. Jeremy Ramirez shared in the documentary that veterans’ awareness of the benefits of service dogs as a potential for treatment is growing, but “there is no standard knowledge of how to access service dog assistance. The responsibility largely falls on our service dog training nonprofit community, and there is very little to no support offered by the VA.”

See Networks and Organizations For Service Dog Support on page 23 of this guide and ways to support them.

## EXPAND VETERAN SUPPORT

The Veterans Affairs (VA) has a full list of benefits for service members to access. Caregivers and loved ones should also seek out support as they can develop secondary trauma due to their veteran’s deployment or resulting PTSD.

As you screen and discuss the documentary, reinforce the importance of getting help by informing your community of the benefits and support services for spouses, children, and parents of a veteran or service member. Such support enables caregivers to take care of the veteran better and to better take care of themselves as well. As we see in the documentary, it is often the loved one of a veteran who was the catalyst for seeking more extensive therapy.






## EXPLORE DIFFERENT TREATMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The most important first step is to have a conversation and begin to talk about mental health needs. While different treatment options are available, dropout rates among veterans remain high, and access to the full spectrum of treatments is not always available.

In **BY MY SIDE**, the focus is on the life-saving benefits of committing to training and working with a service dog. But for some, a service dog is not an option, and we want to make sure all veterans and their families know that other supports can help alongside a service dog or on their own.

## COMPLEMENTARY AND INTEGRATIVE HEALTH (CIH) TREATMENTS

Many activities can complement your treatment plan, helping relieve stress and enhancing mental health. You can discuss with your therapist which one(s) may be right for you. Here is a sampling of CIH treatments and practices to explore and consider.

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <br><b>Yoga</b><br>Learn more <a href="#">here</a> .             | <br><b>Art Therapy</b><br>Learn more <a href="#">here</a> .                                      | <br><b>Acupuncture</b><br>Learn more <a href="#">here</a> .      |
| <br><b>Time in nature</b><br>Learn more <a href="#">here</a> . | <br><b>Meditation and breathing<br/>-based techniques</b><br>Learn more <a href="#">here</a> . | <br><b>Guided imagery</b><br>Learn more <a href="#">here</a> . |

### SUPPORT THE CAMPAIGN

Learn more about the **BY MY SIDE** Impact Campaign [here](#). There is information on how to [Host a Screening](#), [Become a Partner](#), or [Support the Campaign](#).

**“I’d rather be with my dog than actually my own therapist.** The VA, because this place has such a higher cost of living, a lot of the therapists have to move because they can’t afford it, they’re not getting paid enough. So it’s the whole thing of changing therapists all the time and having to start all over again; it aggravates the hell out of me.”

— Ramon Reyes, Veteran, U.S. Army, BY MY SIDE

# NETWORKS AND ORGANIZATIONS TO FIND SUPPORT

**Blue Star Families'** mission is to strengthen military families every day. Through career development, caregiving, and our leading research on military family life, they strive to better understand and provide solutions to the challenges facing today's military families.

**Disabled American Veterans** (DAV) empowers veterans to lead high-quality lives with respect and dignity. They offer many services, including help accessing VA benefits, medical transportation, help with employment and entrepreneurship, and transition services.

**Hope for Heroes'** mission is to enable a sense of accomplishment, empowerment, and unity for our nation's disabled heroes (veterans, police officers, firefighters, and EMTs) through exciting, fun activities and an overall appreciation of the great outdoors.

**Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America's** (IAVA) mission is to connect, unite, and empower post-9/11 veterans. IAVA is a non-partisan member-advised advocacy organization focused on solutions to the issues facing veterans today. In addition to their class advocacy work, IAVA offers a case-management program to help veterans of all generations navigate the government and non-government services available.

**National Alliance on Mental Illness** is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness.

**Project Welcome Home Troops'** mission is to improve the quality of life for veterans, active military, and their families. Their SKY Resilience Training provides breath-based tools that decrease chronic and post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and sleep problems while restoring well-being, mental focus, and a renewed sense of connection and purpose.

**The Dixon Center's** mission is to ensure veterans and military families can succeed where they live and that every organization, across all sectors of society, effectively integrate veterans and their families into their organization and existing programs.

**Stop Soldier Suicide** empowers the military community by providing free resources and support to all past and present military and their families, mitigating suicide risk factors, promoting resiliency, inspiring hope, and encouraging healing and personal growth.

**Veterans Crisis Line** (988) was signed into law in 2020 as the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act authorizing 988 as the new three-digit number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Veterans can dial 988 and press 1 to contact the Veterans Crisis Line.

## (ADD YOUR LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS FOR SUPPORT)

*Moderator Note: It is very important to connect with the community and local organizations in the healing journey. To further this goal, create your list of local resources and add them to this guide.*

Here are some tips when organizing these resources:

- » If you are distributing printed copies of this handbook, add your own printed Word or Google Doc.
- » If you are directing audiences to access this handbook online, print and distribute your own Word or Google Doc, or send it out attached to an email follow-up to your **BY MY SIDE** event.

# By My Side



[WWW.BYMYSIDEDOC.COM](http://WWW.BYMYSIDEDOC.COM)



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YELLOW CHAIR FOUNDATION



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Education