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Flagler College receives grant to research K9s for Warriors program

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Service dogs save lives and with the help of a \$10,000 grant, Flagler College faculty and students are proving it. K9s for Warriors, the nation's largest provider of service dogs to military veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress, recently awarded the college a grant to continue its research of the program's efficacy that it began in the fall of 2015. The money will go towards funding students' presentations of the research at conferences and to incentivizing survey participation (by giving gift cards for completed surveys).

Professors Dr. Tina Jaeckle and Dr. Angelenia Semegon, co-principals of the grant, were notified in December of the award.

"The longitudinal implications of examining efficacy can give additional validity to the use of service dogs for veterans," Jaeckle said. "While there are a number of treatment options available, this appears to holistically approach the mitigation of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. Additionally, the inclusion of Flagler College students in the research process benefits them as well as the college.

The service dogs for the K9s for Warriors program help veterans manage acute symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome, including suicidal thoughts, flashbacks, depression and panic attacks. The animals, mostly mixed breeds that have either been donated or rescued, are trained to detect when their owners experience initial post-traumatic stress symptoms and are taught to disrupt those symptoms from emerging, by pawing, making eye contact and physically blocking them from dangerous behavior. Since the non-profit organization began in 2011, 550 dogs and 278 warriors have been rescued (as of January 2017).

Flagler College's connection to K9s for Warriors began with Jaeckle's involvement — first as a volunteer, then as a member of the organization's Board of Directors and now as an advisor. The Social Sciences professor, also director of the college's Criminology program, specializes in emergency crisis management and trauma. She knew the K9s for Warriors program was working by witnessing the impact of veterans paired with service dogs. But, as she discussed with other Board members, those amazing stories didn't have research to back up what she and others knew. That's when she contacted Psychology Professor Semegon, a fellow colleague with a strong background in research methods.

Together, Semegon and Jaeckle created a questionnaire to assess warriors' overall health. Specifically, they wanted to know about changes in participants' quality of life before and then three, six and 12 months after receiving a

service dog. Semegon isn't ready to fully disclose questionnaire results but said the initial findings, based on approximately 100 respondents, are "showing big drops in the number of reported health issues and significant positive outcomes."

Flagler students have also played a role in the research process. Connor Spangenberg, an alumnus who graduated last year, was one of them. He helped out by putting into practice what he was learning in the classroom.

He input data into a statistical software program, and then analyzed the data for its significance in attaining a "target behavior," or in the case of the K9s for Warriors research, an overall improvement in self-reported health. Last year, he and students Lauren Rodriguez and Sadie Owens presented their initial findings at the Southeastern Psychological Association conference in Atlanta.

"I really learned how to do research with the project and use it now in my work," he said. "When you understand data, you can see what's working and what's not." Spangenberg, a registered behavior technician with The Arc of St. Johns, a local organization that provides services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, secured his job four days prior to graduation. He believes his research experience at Flagler helped set him apart from others. Semegon, Spangenberg's former professor, agrees.

"It truly makes them stand head and shoulders above others when they can say they engaged in research," she said. "It's making a difference, it matters and it's a beautiful thing to be involved in."

Rory Diamond, the executive director of K9s for Warriors, also attests to the value of the college's research. He recently shared it with the U.S. Congress for funding and advocacy purposes.

"Flagler College is helping prove that our K9s For Warriors service dogs help American veterans recover from PTSD," he said. "This is incredibly important work because there are many critics who cite the lack of evidence as to the efficacy of service dogs in this area. They (those at Flagler) are plugging the holes in that research and helping make sure these life-saving dogs will be available for every disabled veteran."

For more information on K9s for Warriors, visit [here](#).

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