

THE FIELD REPORT

WORKING TOGETHER TO SERVE WISCONSIN'S VETERANS COMMUNITY



A MAN'S BEST FRIEND

COMFORT DOG BRINGS JOY TO VHRP FACILITY IN GREEN BAY

By Chris Bucher

With the help of a four-legged friend, the dog days of winter have become an uplifting experience for 17 formerly-homeless veterans.

Sam, a 2-year old therapy dog, has provided more than just companionship for those living at the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs' Veterans Housing and Recovery Program facility in Green Bay.

"Sam helps in many ways, we all benefit from her presence," Marine Corps veteran Roman Fischer said. "She has no ego and is never looking to argue. She wants only to have fun and make us happy."

Sam was presented to the veterans living at the facility in December by Torre Willadsen, the founder of Sheboygan Falls-based Dogs2DogTags. The nonprofit organization

trains canines to be paired with military veterans suffering with things such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression and more.

"It's been very positive all the way around," Willadsen said of the reception his organization has received since its founding in 2015. "Our goal is to save a dog, motivate a veteran and prevent suicide...that's what we're going for."

Building a Foundation

Willadsen has been attached to dogs for much of his lifetime and made a career out of training them. In 2012, the company he worked for — contracted by the U.S. Department of Defense — assigned him to work with a Marine battalion as its field service subject matter expert.

With not much of a military background, Willadsen said his involvement was eye-opening. In the role, Willadsen trained and paired working military explosive detection dogs for combat with 34 Marines. He was then sent to Afghanistan on a seven-month deployment with the Marines. The journey allowed Willadsen to build relationships with both the dogs and the soldiers, and also grew his appreciation for the military.

One night, though, the emotional impact of that connection was tested when a dog handler, Chris Van Etten, was on a mission with his dog, Harley. His life changed forever following the incident.

A sudden explosion from a daisy chain IED resulted in Van Etten losing both of his legs. Despite the life-and-death circumstances, Willadsen said Van Etten's very first request

“Here was a dog that sensed my depression and sought me, a stranger to her, out to lift my mood ... Sam belongs to everyone.

-Roman Fischer



was a simple one.

“The first thing he asked for was his dog,” he said. “He asked for where she was, and he wanted so much to get her to him for his recovery time.”

That connection was the inspiration that led Willadsen to form Dogs2DogTags a few years later. Since then, the organization has placed 20 dogs with veterans following a months-long training process by Willadsen and others.

Sam Makes a House a Home

Having heard of the work Dogs2DogTags does with veterans, Green Bay VHRP Site Director Marion Jimos reached out to Willadsen last fall, inquiring about potentially getting a comfort dog for the veterans at the facility.

Unfortunately, Willadsen didn't have any prospective dogs for the task at the time. But one day later, he caught wind of Sam, who was getting fostered by a family. A few days later, Willadsen brought Sam up to the Green Bay VHRP facility. The impact the dog had on the veterans was evident the second Willadsen walked through the door with her on their first visit.

“My intention was to just introduce (Sam) to them and see how they felt about her and get her to them this summer,” Willadsen said. “But they said, ‘We’ll take her now and

you can come up and train her a couple of days a week. We’ll keep her.’”

Willadsen agreed to the offer, and visits the Green Bay facility several times every week to help train Sam as she lives with the veterans.

“It’s about what I can do to make the veterans feel happy,” he said. “She’s done great for the facility, everyone is really happy. She’s definitely brought a lot of love and happiness to the place.”

Though Sam is a companion to all 17 veterans at the facility, her main handler is Fischer. That means while everyone takes her for walks or plays with her, Fischer is the one who feeds her and cleans up after her, and she sleeps inside of his room.

Fischer said being with Sam on a daily basis has been a life-changing experience for him and those at the facility.

“Here was a dog that sensed my depression and sought me, a stranger to her, out to lift my mood,” Fischer said. “Sam belongs to everyone. Or, better put, we are all Sam’s patients.”

For Willadsen, seeing the results of his dedication firsthand is a surreal experience.

“It’s the most rewarding experience you could possibly imagine,” Willadsen said. “When they tell me that it’s changed their life and I see how it’s changed their life, there’s nothing better.”

A Bright Future

With the continued growth of Willadsen’s organization, he eyes fundraising for a brick-and-mortar headquarters as his next task. He said that in addition to using the facility to house and train more dogs, he also wants to begin pairing them with first responders and be able to train certified service animals.

“You have to follow your mission and you have to provide that mission to the people that it’s directed toward,” Willadsen said. “Our main goal is to build a respectable reputation so that people know that when they’re giving money, it’s doing and going to the right thing.”

The WDVA’s VHRP has been a program in Wisconsin for 25 years and has the goal of helping homeless veterans and those at risk of becoming homeless. The program is designed to help homeless veterans receive job training, education, counseling and rehabilitative services they may need to gain steady employment, affordable housing and the skills to live a productive lifestyle.

The Green Bay VHRP facility opened in November 2018 and is the fourth WDVA facility in Wisconsin. The others are in Chippewa Falls, King and Union Grove.