

## Overview

Big Paws Canine, founded in 2008 in Aynor, South Carolina, provides service, therapy, and companion dogs to disabled veterans and former first responders. Steered by a Board of five and a volunteer staff of fourteen (and growing), Steve Slavik, Co-Founder and CEO is a law enforcement and Marine Corps veteran who in conjunction with Mary Salvik and Terry Brokenbough are steadfast supporters of veteran and first-responder support especially in the face of incidents and experiences that have impaired these brave men and women from leading what one would consider a normal, post-service life.

The organization is present nationwide where volunteer staff operate in three core regions – East, Midwest, and West. As of 2020, Big Paws has over 200 service dogs in action with veterans and first responders nationwide. Big Paws receives referrals from a host of entities nationwide, interviews each candidate for a service dog, and then makes a subsequent match. The cost of training a canine varies between \$5,000 and \$15,000. The veteran or first responder who receives the dog is charged a \$1 fee for receiving the dog and then another \$1 per month as a membership due.

The Board is adamant in its position that every veteran and first responder will receive continued training throughout the life of their dog for a membership fee of \$1 per owner. To finance the training of the dogs (and the eventual staffing costs), Big Paws holds fundraisers and community outreach events and has received donations, sponsorships, and grants.

## Need

Putting oneself in harm's way for a larger cause, one much larger than can be rationally argued or even communicated at times is unbelievably principled. Every single day the U.S. welcomes back to our shores war veterans, young men and women who have put their very lives on the line to defend the flag and all that it stands for. The same can be said of first responders - police, fire, and emergency professionals - who wake every day not knowing if they will be returning to their beds and families, rooted in a cause and belief that is as moral and virtuous as humanly possible.

Without these individuals, society collapses. Yet, our capacity to care for these brave men and women upon their return (from war or a life-threatening situation) is compromised. Not compromised by a lack of resources, but rather, a lack of a coordinated effort between public, private, and non-profit entities. Expecting the government to manage all veteran and first-responder affairs, especially in the face of haunting diagnoses such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a momentous task. The private sector does not necessarily have a financial incentive to enter the arena alone, but non-profits on the other hand lie at a strategic crossroads between the two sectors to add value that is directed, measurable, and impactful.

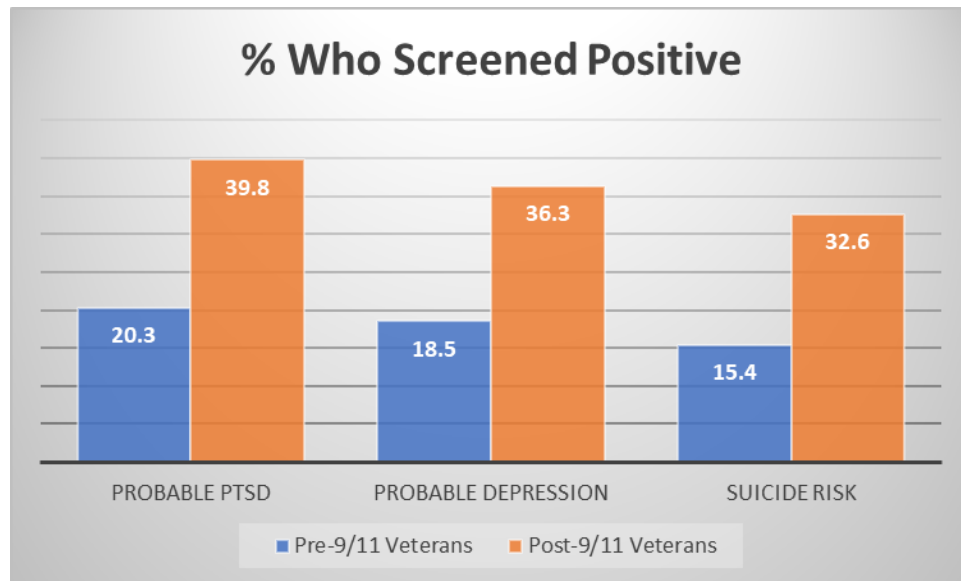
In partnership with the Loyola University Chicago *School of Social Work*, the University of Southern California (USC) *School of Social Work Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families (CIR)* conducted a ground-breaking study in which they interviewed over 1,000 veterans in the greater Chicago metropolitan area (Chicagoland) surrounding a range of issues – employment, education, physical/psychiatric ailments among others. The overall findings from “The State of the American Veteran: The Chicagoland Veterans Study,” strongly represent those observed in parallel studies from Los Angeles and Orange Counties in Southern California.

A veteran, regardless of the war and/or operation is a veteran, period. However, the Chicagoland study provided a striking insight into the differences between pre-9/11 and post-9/11 veterans. In short,

post-9/11 veterans displayed troubling, psychiatric symptoms at much higher rates compared to their pre-9/11 cohort.

As Graph I illustrates, the percentage of veterans who returned to their homes and families were at a much greater risk (over 100% greater in most cases) of developing PTSD, depression, and committing suicide than past generations.

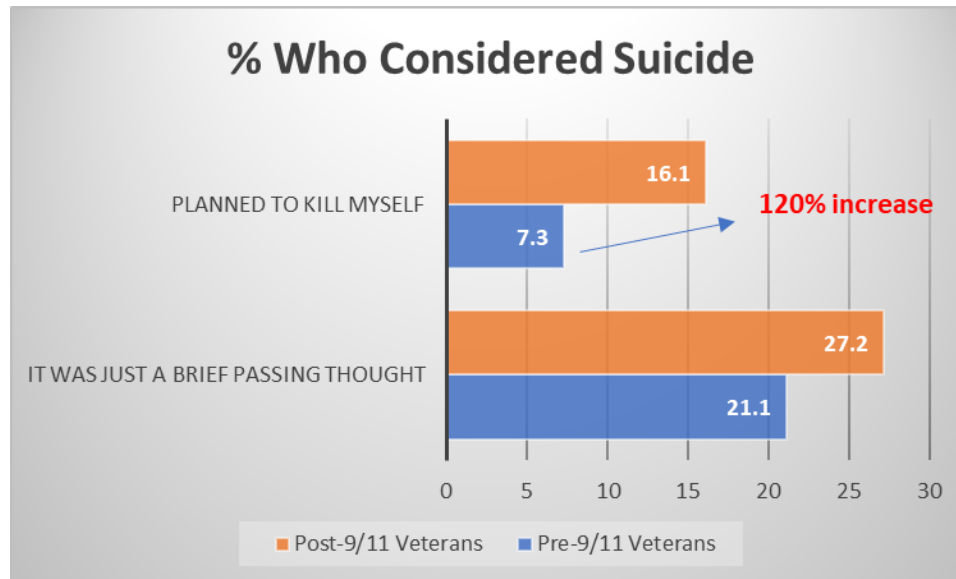
**Graph I**



**Source:** Castro, Carl A., Kintzle, Sara, Rasheed, Janice Matthews. "The State of the American Veteran: The Chicagoland Veterans Study." USC School of Social Work. 2016.

Graph II is more alarming as the study demonstrated a 120% jump in post-9/11 veterans who had expressed plans of how they would kill themselves.

**Graph II**



**Source:** Castro, Carl A., Kintzle, Sara, Rasheed, Janice Matthews. "The State of the American Veteran: The Chicagoland Veterans Study." USC School of Social Work. 2016.

Regarding first responders, the situation although not quite as striking as veterans, still paints a grim picture. The University of Phoenix commissioned a survey to better understand the effects of day-to-day, first-responder work. Over 2,000 police officers, EMT/paramedics, firefighters, and nurses were surveyed and the findings are not that far off from those issues afflicting veterans. An alarmingly high 84% stated they have experienced a traumatic event while on the job, while one-third (34%) have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder.

This last point is disturbing. Most Americans either intimately know, or through friends of friends, an officer of the law, nurse, firefighter, or EMT/paramedic. To think that one out of every three has been diagnosed with a mental health disorder in part due to their work conditions is appalling.

With most non-profits there is always a "need," but the need regarding veterans and first responders is present and growing. While basic services are available, finding cost-effective, measurable service interventions is where Big Paws Canine is smartly positioned to intervene and add value.

## Big Paws Expertise

Aside from the human aspect, the cost to society of a veteran or first responder transitioning back haphazardly is exorbitant. These are human beings - fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers - who have chosen professions where the element of danger is at its highest. These are also necessary positions, and every resident of the United States owes a great deal of gratitude to these brave women and men for their service.

Big Paws was founded on the factual basis that service dogs with this specific population (veterans and first responders) assist, aid, and improve quality of life. Multiple studies (Yount, R.A., et al, 2013, Yeager, A.F. and J. Irwin, 2012 and Taylor, M.F., M.E. Edwards, and J.A. Pooley, 2013) have demonstrated that veterans, for example, suffering from PTSD and placed with service dogs help with reducing daily

anxiety, hypervigilance, flashbacks and nightmares. These are exactly the symptoms that lead to suicidal thoughts and isolation.

Big Paws Canine takes a holistic approach to each canine placement. Again, the client is the human, but the deliverable is living, breathing, flesh, and blood. These are matches for life (the canine in most cases) and focusing on a collaborative relationship is what drives the foundation's mission.