

Wounded Warriors, Ontario Legion partnership will help veterans living with PTSD, address stigma



By Brock Weir

In more than 20 years living with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Medric Cousineau never had a mental health professional rush to his bedside when he was having an "episode" to say, "Hey, buddy, I've got you."

Then Thai, a yellow Labrador retriever, came into his life.

"She does that every single night," says Cousineau, a retired RCAF captain who has lived with PTSD since being hurt in a search and rescue mission in 1986. "She is so good, now she can head them off before they even start. She truly is a hero."

Life was pretty rough before Cousineau received his PTSD service dog, a partnership that was only forged when his home branch of the Royal Canadian Legion banded together with the Nova Scotia-Nunavut command to raise the money needed to bring Thai to him.

The struggle to therapy dogs for Ontario servicepersons is set to become a little bit easier in the future with a new partnership between Wounded Warriors and the Royal Canadian Legion's Ontario Command.

Mr. Cousineau was on hand for the partnership's announcement on Thursday which will see Ontario Command provide \$225,000 to fund 10 PTSD service dogs, which will then be paired with ill and injured veterans and their families within the Province.

The partnership comes on the heels of the Federal Canadian General Standards Service Board decision to withdraw their intent to produce a National Standard for Service Dogs, a move which was greeted with derision by those gathered at Ontario Command last week.

"In 2015, a moratorium was placed on the use of poppy funds for service dogs until Canadian National Standards were developed," said Ontario Command president Sharon McKeown. "Over three years later, last year, frustrated with the lack of progress in developing these standards, we at Ontario Command began resourcing other provincial commands and service dog providers in light of putting together a program for Ontario Command. It was essential to us that service providers, the dog providers, be reputable, recognized organizations. Partnering with Wounded Warriors Canada, which has been working with our comrades in the east and the west, was a regular step for us.

"The mandate of Wounded Warriors and the Royal Canadian Legion are basically alike. Our mandate is the care and comfort of military and RCMP veterans. Theirs is the same, but includes first responders. Going forward, we will go forward to develop a

successful partnership in service to our veterans and their families.?

The partnership was also warmly received by Phil Ralph, National Program Director of Wounded Warriors Canada, who heralded Thursday's announcement as a 'proud and historic day' for the organization.

Back in February, Wounded Warriors announced its national program for PTSD service dogs, but, in that time, the playing field has change with the roadblock before the development of national standards.

'There is a military dictum that is very simple: lead, follow, or get out of the way,' he said. 'Wounded Warriors Canada has decided to take the lead on this and to publish standards that are clearly available on our website and we know people across the country have seen the life-changing nature that these dogs have in the lives of our veterans. Some of those changed lives are in this room today with their dogs. We have been proud to support this initiative across the country for the last number of years.

'The launch of our program in February signalled to the Canadian public that there was a place they could trust to put their hard-earned donor dollars in a program that was credible, looked at the highest standards and was transparent as to how it was delivered. We are so excited to announce this, our first strategic partnership, and the largest donation to Wounded Warriors Canada PTSD Service Dogs from the Royal Canadian Legion's Ontario Command, to the Comrades in Ontario, I want to say thank you. To its leadership, thank you. You are leading the way in the country by positioning your trust with wounded warriors Canada and its PTSD service dog program.'

From the perspective of Mr. Cousineau, this announcement goes a long way, but there is still a 'stigma' that needs to be addressed. He had particularly sharp words for the Minister of Veterans Affairs and his 'discourse about psychiatric service dogs in the House of Commons.'

'As a disabled veteran with a mental health injury, who lives with PTSD, I need no further stigma,' said Mr. Cousineau, who walked thousands of kilometres to raise awareness of PTSD wearing a t-shirt with the slogan 'Put the Stigma Down' emblazoned across the back. 'A review of the Government website is littered with the word 'psychiatric.' That word is, in and of itself, stigmatizing. That stigma needs to stop and it needs to stop right now.

'Today, Wounded Warriors Canada, as Canada's foremost veterans and first responders' mental health charity, in conjunction with the Ontario Provincial Command, are going to put that stigma down effective immediately. Our Service Dog program will cease using references to 'psychiatric' in reference to our service dog program. On a Go Forward basis, we will have veteran assist service dogs.

'Today's announcement, with the Ontario Command, was put there with the single-focused purpose, that being to help veterans and their families. Some are going to naturally ask, is it enough? The honest answer is no. However, no successful journey has ever started without those first very important steps. Today, those steps have been taken.'