

Group training dogs to help veterans with PTSD

[Drew C. Wilson](#)

2010-12-22 18:20:11



HAVELOCK — The cute factor in dogs has long been known to have a calming effect on their owners.

A new group aims to expand on that idea by training Great Danes to be service dogs for veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Laura Westerfield, a New Bern breeder of Great Danes, recently started Paws and People Assisting Wounded Warriors.

“I was a Great Dane breeder and I just wanted to do a little bit more,” she said.

Using the long-established Paws for Pets program as a model, Westerfield set out to train a young group of her dogs to act as psychiatric service dogs and rehabilitative assistance dogs.

Delores “Gaye” Bougie, wife of a retired Cherry Point Marine, and Kristeena Siebert, of Havelock, whose husband is an active-duty Marine at Cherry Point air station, are helping in that quest.

A service dog needs one year of training to earn credentials, plus an extra three months to learn specific tasks to help the client.

“Basic psychiatric service dogs are trained to do a specific task for their human partner,” said Bougie.

The dogs learn to do relatively simple tasks, such as turning on the lights or checking a room to make sure everything is OK. Some dogs are actually trained to remind a client when to take medicine based on a schedule coordinated with the dog’s feeding time. The dogs can be used for counterbalancing their partner and can be trained to wake their partner to the sound of an alarm.

Dogs learn how to block the handler from going into dangerous situations.

“There have also been dogs that have called 911,” said Westerfield.

In that case, a special phone with one button is used where the dog simply has to knock the handset off the cradle to dial for help.

One of the most important qualities in the service dogs is the ability to remain calm, Westerfield said. Their value extends way beyond the standard commands of heal, stay and sit.

She said Great Danes have not been a breed preferred for service dogs because of their short lifespan, about 7 to 9 years.

“They don’t want to put two years of training into a dog that’s only going to live five more years,” Westerfield said.

Westerfield is still moving forward with Great Danes, who have grandparents that have lived up to 16 years.

For now, all of the dogs being trained are females.

"It doesn't mean we're always going to do girls," Westerfield said. "It's just that they mature more quickly."

The group is currently looking for indoor space to train the dogs, which are currently being trained in Westerfield's front yard on Wilcox Road between Havelock and New Bern.

Though the program has just started, Westerfield hopes to have dogs ready for placement in February.

She said Terrific Pets and Bill's Pet Shop have contributed to the nearly \$3,000 cost to train a service dog.

For more information on the program, call Westerfield at 910-381-7815.

Drew C. Wilson can be contacted at 252-444-1999 or drwilson@freedomenc.com.

© Copyright 2011 Freedom Communications. All Rights Reserved.
[Privacy Policy](#) | [User Agreement](#) | [Site Map](#)