

Program offers free trained dogs to soldiers with post-traumatic stress

Canines help relieve veterans' stress

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Robert Worthington wants a good night's sleep.

The 42-year-old Army veteran from Auburn has struggled with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder since his 1991 deployment to the Gulf War. He typically gets about two hours of sleep at night, suffers from nightmares and can't concentrate well during the day.

"I can't believe it's been more than 20 years and I'm still struggling," he said Wednesday.

He's about to get a specially trained canine to relieve some anxiety. He and his girlfriend hope the pet will help him relax and get the rest he needs.

"If he sleeps more, I'll be able to sleep," said Jennifer Lopez, 32.

Worthington will get the dog at no charge to him through a partnership supported by the Warrior Transition Battalion at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, the nonprofit group Canine Assistants and Milk-Bone.

Lt. Col. Karl Bockler brought his special assistance canine, Bella, to a ceremony Wednesday where the sponsors announced their gift to Worthington. Bockler supervises the canine assistance program at Lewis-McChord. He aims to help at least 10 soldiers receive a dog each year.

"The big thing with PTSD is, believe it or not, Bella is attuned to what I'm feeling," said Bockler, who came home from a tour in Iraq in 2007 with physical injuries and post-traumatic stress.

Bella helps him by checking rooms for him if he feels anxious or clearing space around him if he's uncomfortable. She's also a constant and reliable friend, Bockler said.

Worthington looks forward to the same companionship.

"They sense things I don't think any other animal can sense," he said.

He's going to a Canine Assistants camp this summer where he'll choose a dog and learn how to work with the animal.

"When there's nightmares, she'll be there with me," he said.

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