

Canine Intervention for PTSD



Strong anecdotal evidence suggests that trained service dogs can help mitigate symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI). In particular, they may help reduce incidence of substance abuse and suicide in military veterans with PTSD and TBI. Two Jefferson College of Nursing faculty members—assistant professor **Jennifer Shiroff, PhD**, and instructor **Jacquelyn O'Rourke-Fulford, MSN**—have begun the process of formally assessing the effectiveness of service dogs as a therapeutic intervention for veterans with PTSD or TBI.

"Service dog use has increased over two decades, but there is a lack of definitive information about impacts and little standardization of implementation," says O'Rourke-Fulford. Therefore, Dr. Shiroff explains, "We are beginning to build a foundation of scientific evidence to support clinical guidelines for determining medical necessity, as well as standardization of prescriptive practices and training of service dogs."

Dr. Shiroff and O'Rourke-Fulford are collaborating on the initial stages of the research with Leashes of Valor (LOV), a nonprofit that helps connect veterans with service dogs that are specifically trained to recognize and help manage PTSD and TBI symptoms. Indeed, Jefferson College of Nursing's canine "chief compassion officer" Maggie—a LOV-trained Labrador—helps improve mental health in the University community through companionship and affection.

In parallel work, **Erin Eller**—a student completing a master's degree in pharmacology—is developing the protocol for a clinical trial intended to provide evidence on effectiveness and impact of trained service dog intervention. The trial could provide data that would help demonstrate whether the intervention is worthy of insurance reimbursement, which would be key to expanding availability of service dogs to veterans in need. ■



Chief Compassion Officer Maggie, accompanied by military veterans **Jason Haag** and **Danique Masingill**, two of the founders of Leashes of Valor.