

Having a Vet's Back 24/7

California Post starts service dog training for local veterans

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A Sacramento VFW Post is aiming to help its members by providing free service dog training for those diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

VFW Post 8358's service dog program started in April 2018. The Post program has trained a total of seven dogs as of this past April.

VFW Post 8358 member Bruce Riecke, the director of the program, said to qualify for the program, a person must be a VFW member who has a service-connected rating for PTSD or a service canine recommendation letter from a mental health care provider.

"I've been satisfied with the results," Riecke said. "We just have a lot of good people with the program."

Riecke is an Army veteran who served in the Vietnam War from 1971 to 1972 as a helicopter pilot with XXIV (24th) Corps. He, along with deputy director Baldwin Wong and Department of California and Post 8358 Quartermaster Dean Lee, started the program.

Riecke said he believes dogs are instrumental in helping veterans with PTSD, whether it be from combat or sexual assault.

"A service dog replaces the feeling of having a squad or a platoon that is watching a veteran's back," Riecke said. "A family can't do that on a 24/7 basis."

Riecke said that the service canine program is in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and the training is free to eligible veterans.

"From the beginning, I've made sure money doesn't get in the way of a dog getting to a veteran," Riecke said. "We don't want dollars to be a restriction to help veterans."

Riecke said he hopes the program expands to other VFW Posts across the country. He said

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the program was designed to be shared with others Posts that are interested in starting a service dog program. Members interested in starting a program at a Post can email Riecke at bariecke@gmail.com.

“The whole point of this is getting this whole concept established around the country to keep veterans from hurting themselves,” Riecke said. “I hope if a program like this is implemented across the country, it could affect the suicide rate.”

This article was featured in the May/June 2019 issue of VFW Checkpoint. If you're a Post, District or Department Commander and aren't receiving the Checkpoint e-newsletter, please contact the VFW magazine at magazine@vfw.org.