



**VA**



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Veterans Health Administration



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY  
OF THE UNITED STATES**

## Operation Hero-Animal Bond

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is always looking for new ways to support Veterans' health and well-being. Operation Hero-Animal Bond, a partnership between VHA and the Humane Society of the United States, aims to improve Veterans' wellness by promoting the human-animal bond, pet-keeping, and volunteering to care for animals. Encouraging pet ownership and community interaction through volunteering helps Veterans, animals, and local communities.

Nearly 70% of U.S. households have a pet.<sup>1</sup> Most pet owners speak of the joy and comfort their pets provide and consider their pets to be family members that offer love and companionship.

Owners say their pet is important to their well-being. A recent report by the Human Animal Bond Research Initiative<sup>2</sup> says that pet ownership in the U.S. has led to an \$11.7 billion savings in the country's health care costs. The bond between people and animals can improve physical and mental health,<sup>3,4</sup> leading to:

- Lower blood pressure
- Reduced stress levels
- Decreased anxiety and depression
- Increased feelings of safety and trust
- Fewer feelings of loneliness
- Increased social interaction

## Frequently Asked Questions

### ***Whom does Operation Hero-Animal Bond support and how?***

The Operation Hero-Animal Bond partnership supports Veterans, their families and caregivers, VA medical centers, and shelters and rescue organizations nationwide.

Operation Hero-Animal Bond helps these groups by giving Veterans opportunities to foster or adopt animals. It also helps Veterans volunteer at shelters and rescues, which can increase social interaction and decrease isolation and feelings of loneliness. Shelters and rescues benefit when people volunteer to fill unmet community needs and when animals are fostered or adopted.

Operation Hero-Animal Bond links VA medical centers with nearby community shelters and rescues to encourage Veterans' volunteering, fostering, and adoption — which in turn promote Veterans' health and well-being. In this way, the partnership supports VA's mission: "to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan."

### ***What does it mean to foster, adopt, and volunteer? What are the benefits?***

To *foster* a pet is to care for a homeless animal until a “forever family” is found. Foster families can enjoy caring for a pet for a short time, knowing they are keeping the animal safe and loved. Fostering reduces overcrowding in animal shelters and prepares pets for lifelong adoption.

To *adopt* a pet is to welcome an animal into a home forever. According to the Humane Society of the United States, approximately 6–8 million animals enter U.S. shelters each year. Through adoption, more animals can find a lifelong home. Pet adoption can also benefit the people who adopt by improving their physical and emotional health.

Those who *volunteer* at an animal shelter or rescue organization provide an important service. Volunteers may spend time with animals, helping them build trust with humans. This increases their chances of being adopted. Volunteering can be a fun opportunity to meet new people, learn new skills, and participate in the community.

### ***How does Operation Hero-Animal Bond differ from existing programs?***

There are many programs that facilitate pet adoptions and offer volunteer and foster opportunities to Veterans. Operation Hero-Animal Bond further advances these initiatives, representing a national strategic partnership creating new opportunities for VHA’s 1,250 health care facilities and more than 350 shelters and rescues affiliated with the Humane Society of the United States. This partnership also educates Veterans, their families, and VA employees about how adopting, volunteering, and fostering can contribute to increased well-being and feelings of social integration.

### ***Who is eligible?***

Veterans interested in adopting are eligible regardless of discharge status. To adopt, they must provide one of the following credentials:

- DD Form 214 or 215
- Driver’s license with a Veteran designation
- Veteran Health Identification Card
- Department of Defense Identification Card
- Veteran ID Card

Veterans or family members must also meet the adoption requirements of the Humane Society of the United States shelter or the rescue partner. Fostering and volunteering requirements vary by shelter and rescue organization.

### ***Whom should I contact for more information?***

Please contact Jamie D. Davis at [CommunityEngagement@va.gov](mailto:CommunityEngagement@va.gov) or Heidi Ortmeyer at [veterans@humanesociety.org](mailto:veterans@humanesociety.org).

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<sup>1</sup>Pets by the Numbers. (2018, November 6). Retrieved from <https://www.animalsheltering.org/page/pets-by-the-numbers>.

<sup>2</sup>Clower, T. L. & Neaves, T. T. (2015, December). *Healthcare Cost Savings from Pet Ownership*. Retrieved from [https://habri.org/assets/uploads/HABRI\\_Report\\_-\\_Healthcare\\_Cost\\_Savings\\_from\\_Pet\\_Ownership\\_.pdf](https://habri.org/assets/uploads/HABRI_Report_-_Healthcare_Cost_Savings_from_Pet_Ownership_.pdf).

<sup>3</sup>Brooks, H. L., Rushton, K., Lovell, K., Bee, P., Walker, L., Grant, L., & Rogers, A. (2018). The power of support from companion animals for people living with mental health problems: a systematic review and narrative synthesis of the evidence. *BMC psychiatry*, 18(1), 31. doi:10.1186/s12888-018-1613-2.

<sup>4</sup>Beetz, A., Uvnäs-Moberg, K., Julius, H., & Kotrschal, K. (2012). Psychosocial and psychophysiological effects of human-animal interactions: the possible role of oxytocin. *Frontiers in psychology*, 3, 234. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2012.00234.