

SERVICE DOG HELPS CARRIER ON THE JOB



Sometimes, a dog is a letter carrier's best friend. Beau, a trained service dog, accompanies Army veteran **Dwayne Jensen** on his route.

Jensen, a 25-year carrier and Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3 member, struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) caused by his military service from 1990 to 1995, including serving in the Gulf War in 1991. Jensen was an Army air traffic controller in Saudi

Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq during the war. After five years in the Army, he left in 1995 and joined the Postal Service two years later.

Awareness of and research on PTSD grew after Vietnam War veterans returned home with the condition. The term "PTSD" was adopted as an official diagnosis in 1980. New treatments were developed in the 1990s and offered by the Department of Veterans

Affairs (VA). In the years following his Army service, Jensen sought counseling from the VA for his anxiety and depression caused by the condition.

Then he saw a media story about a worker with a service dog and had an idea.

"I think it was a Home Depot employee who had a dog," he recalls, and he wondered whether a dog could help him, too.

PTSD is caused by traumatic or stressful experiences that cause anxiety long after the trauma is over. Often, certain triggers, such as loud noises, may bring the anxiety back, interfering with daily life. Treatment is available

for PTSD, but it may not be enough to help someone with the condition deal with it on a daily basis. That's where a dog could help.

A service dog can help someone with PTSD, anxiety or similar conditions by detecting rising anxiety before it becomes serious and then intervening in some way. Each dog receives training to match the owner's needs. Sometimes a service dog is trained to detect anxiety and then calm the dog's owner by distracting him or her from the thoughts or outside stimuli that trigger the stress. A simple lick to the face or touch with a paw may be enough to soothe the anxiety. A service dog also might be trained to guide the owner away from an anxious situation, such as loud noises. Some dogs even retrieve a phone to call for help during an anxious moment or remind their owners to take medication. Whatever the dog is trained to do, animal and human form a close bond that helps the dog do the job.

But of all the workers to have a dog, Jensen wondered, would it work for a letter carrier? After all, mailmen and dogs are well-known adversaries.

"For a while I didn't really do anything because... the Postal Service and dogs," Jensen said. "It was different, let's put it that way."

But after doing some research and learning how well trained a service dog can be, he contacted WNYHeroes, a veterans' service organization in Western New York. Through its "Pawsitive for Heroes" program, the group matched him with a dog trainer who started the process of finding and training the right dog.

He also had to get permission from USPS. With the assistance of his



Dwayne Jensen and Beau

Beau's service vest reminds people that the dog is working.



branch, which helped him submit the required documents, USPS approved his request in April after a process that took more than a year and was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. A short time later, a dog that was a good match was ready. "I needed a bigger-sized dog because I do a lot of walking," he said. "They found me Beau."

Beau, a shepherd mix, was a rescue from Alabama who had a rough life as a puppy, but who now has a close bond with Jensen as he accompanies the carrier on his route in Olean, NY, 70 miles south of Buffalo. After a 30-day trial period with Beau at his side, the dog proved he was up to the task and was approved to accompany Jensen on the job.

Beau is trained to help Jensen in many ways, including relieving stress. "He can sense if I have anxiety," Jensen said. "He can rub up against me to take my mind off the anxiety so I pay attention to him." Beau stays close to Jensen all the time—it's part of their bond. "I protect him; he protects me," the carrier said.

Defying the stereotype of dogs being aggressive toward mailmen, Beau was happy to come to work at the post office. "He's the only dog I've ever seen to be in the same office with 20 postal uniforms," Jensen said.

"While I'm casing the mail, I have him hooked to the case, and he just lies there the whole time," the carrier said. "He'll go everywhere around with me in the office. When we go to the street, he hops in the front of the mail truck." Beau walks with Jensen to every delivery point on his route.

Jensen's customers know and like Beau, but petting him is not an option—service dogs are working, too, and shouldn't be distracted. Beau wears a vest that reminds people that he's on the job. While some postal customers would like to give Beau attention, most know that it's not allowed.

However, there are ways to let Beau know he's a good boy. "They ask me if he can have a treat, and I say, 'Yes, he can have a treat,'" Jensen said, "but they have to give it to me, and then I have to give it to him, so he knows I'm the one that gives it to him so he won't expect one all the time."

As for other dogs on the route, they don't bother Beau. He's trained to sit when they encounter a dog, Jensen said. It's part of their bond: "He knows if another dog comes out, I'm protecting him."

Thanks to reports about Jensen and Beau in local media outlets, postal customers on his route have helped minimize Beau's contact with other dogs. "It got awareness out to the general public," he said. "I noticed that people are keeping their dogs in a lot better."

Jensen said he hopes that veteran letter carriers and others who need a service dog on their routes can get them based on his experience with gaining approval from the Postal Service for his dog. His branch provides information to carriers who want help with the process. As the news spread, the branch has received inquiries from across the country.



Beau goes everywhere that Jensen goes on his route.

"How we did it is forwarded to any of the carriers who need it," he said.

Beau is classified as a service dog because he is trained to perform certain tasks to help Jensen through the day, such as comforting him in stressful situations. He is different from an emotional support animal, which provides support or comfort for someone but isn't trained to help with specific tasks. Service animals and emotional support animals are sometimes treated differently under the law. As a service dog, Beau has a legal right to accompany Jensen even in places where dogs aren't otherwise allowed, such as businesses on his route.

Business customers don't complain, though, because Beau is a big star in Olean.

"The community loves it. We're walking around and people stop, honk their horns and wave and say how awesome it is. People take our pictures," Jensen said. "It's all been a very good, positive experience." **PR**