

Legion linking vets with dogs



TONY BRITT/Lake City Reporter

Patricia Proctor with the American Legion Post 57 (left) and Katelyn Holley with South East Elite Working Dogs talk Wednesday about the Legionnaire Dogs program that is being launched by the Legion with help from Holley and the Lake City Humane Society. The program will help get local veterans with companion or service dogs at no cost.

Legionnaire Dogs program launched

By TONY BRITT
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The American Legion Post 57 is hoping to help local vet-

erans find a new man's best friend.

Post 57 is launching the Legionnaire Dogs program where veterans can potential-

ly get service dogs for their physical, social and mental needs.

"They will be service dogs and companion dogs, dogs

that will alert to nightmares, diabetes and other needs," said Patricia Proctor, a Post 57

DOGS continued on 7A

DOGS

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member, who has been working to get the Legionnaire Dogs program launched.

Katelyn Holley with South East Elite Working Dogs is working with the Legion to train the dogs for the program. Proctor said Holley can train the dogs for almost anything that the veteran needs.

Proctor estimates that they've been working on the program for at least three months.

"It was my idea," she said. "I've been dreaming about this for a long time to help our veterans here with dogs because apparently all the organizations that provide dogs to veterans, number one, it's prohibitive in terms of finances, waiting time and you name it. Columbia County veterans don't have that kind of time."

Proctor said she has help in obtaining dogs for the program through a partnership with the Lake City Humane Society. She has also been working on getting donations for the program in general. The lynchpin, though, to the program is Holley, who is a certified K9 trainer and handler.

Proctor, Holley, the LCHS and a team of Post 57 members are spearheading the program.

"I only want veterans to get the dogs that they deserve because a life with a dog is a beautiful life," Proctor said. "There's nothing

like the companionship of a dog, for whatever reason the dog is with the veteran."

Proctor plans for the program to be cost-free to the veterans.

"The donations and contributions that we get will be going pretty much to Katelyn, because Katelyn is going to work at a reduced price," she said. "I can't ask her to add her expertise without any kind of charge at all. This is her career, but she's going to help us."

Getting the project up and running has been a major emphasis for Proctor and others associated with the program.

The Legionnaires Dog program was first introduced publicly at the Veterans Resource Fair/Stand Down event at Post 57 on Wednesday. The event, which attracted more than 100 local veterans, was designed to serve as a networking event where veterans could learn about different types of services that they may not be aware of.

While working to get the program started, Proctor collected numerous applications from veterans who wanted service/companion dogs for their needs, showing there was a need for the program, and provided it to local American Legion officials.

The plan is to make sure letters go out to veterans to determine whether they want or need a dog. Those application letters then need to be returned prompt-



COURTESY

Katelyn Holley with South East Elite Working Dogs trains a dog. Holley is helping the American Legion Post 57 by training dogs for its new Legionnaire Dogs program.

ly, telling program coordinators what they needs are.

"We can't give him a dog without knowing what he needs," Proctor said.

As it currently stands, there is additional information which is needed to get the program to its next level, including the amount of training time for the dogs, what the dogs will be trained to do as companion or service dogs, and the number of dogs needed for the program.

"The number of dogs I'll be training is up in the air. It depends on how many vets we get," Holley said.

Proctor said she received a tremendous amount of response

from veterans interested in the program during the resource fair.

"The criteria is any vet who wants a dog must show the fact they he has shelter for the dog and is able to feed the dog," she said, noting all medical expenses for the dog will be at a reduced rate through the LCHS veterinarian. "I have not left any stone unturned so that the veteran has the best possible way to have a dog and take care of it."

Holley said the dog training will depend on the individual veteran's needs.

"It just depends on the veterans," she said. "We can do PTSD anxiety pressure therapy, cardiac arrest detection, diabetic detec-

tion, seizure detection and mobility dogs. It just really depends on the veterans' needs."

The letters have not gone out yet informing veterans when they will be getting dogs through the program, as Proctor said the current focus is letting veterans know that the program exists.

Proctor and Holley are ecstatic to have the program launched, noting they talked to more than 100 veterans about the new program at the resource fair.

"It's exciting," Holley said.

"There's a whole team of us working on this," Proctor added. "The Auxiliary has offered to run dinners and things as fundraisers. This is all going require the generosity of Columbia County if we have fundraisers. Monies have to come in and we're paying a small fee to the Humane Society, not for the adoption of the dog, but if that dog has been chipped, vaccinated, spade or whatever care it's had, we're going to pay for those services, but we're not going to pay for the dog. The veterinarian will be working at a reduced charge for services that a vet that has a dog if the dog has a cold or needs medication, they can go to our veterinarian and get it at a reduced cost."

Veterans interested in getting applications for dogs can contact Proctor at 386-961-5896 and Holley at 386-205-4300 or by email at Katelyn@southeastelite-workingdogs.com.