 Aug 31, 2017 Sarah Calams, Associate Editor\*\* 

**How a therapy dog organization is giving back to veterans, first responders**

**Hero Pups, a nonprofit, volunteer-based organization, places therapy dogs with veterans, firefighters, police officers and EMS providers**

Hope: a simple four-letter word. But for Laura Barker, it's the motivation behind helping veterans and first responders.

[Hero Pups](http://www.heropups.com/), a nonprofit, volunteer-based organization in New Hampshire, places therapy dogs with veterans, firefighters, police officers and EMS providers. Hero Pups started placing dogs in 2012 and the rest, as they say, is history. The idea for the organization occurred in 2011 after Barker's son was shot while in Afghanistan. "When he came back, he was going through all these surgeries and you get to know all these other service members with combat injuries," she said. "One day, someone walked into the hospital with a therapy dog and I watched how some of these guys reacted." It was an easy decision for Barker, who has a background in rescuing dogs. "It was that perfect marriage. It was something I was passionate about – saving dogs – and then I saw these service members and how they reacted," she said. Hero Pups started placing dogs in 2012 and the rest, as they say, is history.

**HELPING VETERANS AND FIRST RESPONDERS** During a ride along with a police officer, Barker realized that veterans and the nation’s first responders were facing similar issues. "I didn't want to just limit this to our veterans," she said. "How they get to where they are might be a different path, but if they're getting to that same space of anxiety, stress and depression then we have to include them." Barker didn’t have to think twice about adding first responders into the mix.  "Why not? It makes so much sense. They're our heroes and we rely on them every single day. When they get off shift and go home, we don't always know all the struggles they're dealing with. There are a lot of difficult things that come with the job."

**NOT IN IT FOR THE MONEY** In fact, Hero Pups does not place a dog on somebody's ability to pay. When Barker heard of another organization asking people for $30,000 in order to acquire a therapy dog, she was beside herself. "Who has that kind of money sitting around? It shouldn't cost that much. It shouldn't take two years to train, and people who say it does generally aren't in it for the right reasons," Barker said. Barker recommends that those interested in acquiring a therapy dog – before getting their heart broken and falling in love with a dog – do their research. She recommends to ask an organization: What a therapy dog will cost AND What you have to do in order to get a therapy dog. Barker's goal is to help people and help dogs – not to make money. At the end of the day, Barker says it's just about the people and the dogs.

**FIRST RESPONDER COMMUNITY FEEDBACK** Countless examples flood Barker's memories when she thinks about how she's helped both heroes and their dogs over the years. However, two heartwarming stories stand out among the sea of comfort and relief.

In 2013, she placed a service dog with a firefighter. Shortly after the firefighter received the dog, Barker says she had an unusual – or so she thought – request from the firefighter. "The firefighter calls me and he's like, 'I really want to get a puppy,'" Barker said. "And I'm like, 'I already gave you one. You can't get two.'" She didn't expect to hear what the firefighter said next. "He said, 'no, no, no. I want to get a puppy so I can train it for someone else.' He said he got a puppy that was trained and wanted to pay it back by training someone else's dog. That's a win."

The second story is both heartwarming and heart-wrenching.

A hero in need reached out to Barker and was unsure who else to talk to. "I'm not sure if he wanted a dog, but he reached out and he started talking to me. He was not in the right place. In order to receive a dog, we require that you get some type of service – whether that's peer-to-peer or if you go the VA or local veterans' center – anywhere that allows you to talk to somebody," Barker said. Barker talked to the man on the phone for 30 minutes. When they were getting ready to hang up, all he could do was thank her.

"I said, 'well I didn't really do anything and I don't have a dog to give you right now.' I told him he had some things to do and that so did I. And he said, 'no, thank you. You gave me hope.'" Barker, struggling to hold back the tears, said the phone call reminded her why she continues to push forward.

"When it's hot and I really don't feel like walking a half mile with each of the dogs, I think of that phone call. We don't want people to think that a dog is going to change everything. It will help, but you still have to address the issue at hand." The man is still going through the process, but Barker says she expects that he will be ready for a dog soon and that he will be the first to give back.

"I hope this helps and reaches somebody who's not sure what to do next. It will give them some hope."

And hope – that simple four-letter word – is what it's all about. As a matter of fact, Barker says it's going to be the name of the next puppy.

\*\* for full story go to https://www.firerescue1.com/therapy-dogs