The TriService Nursing Research Program has funded the Working Dogs for Wounded Warriors: Effects of animal-assisted therapy on PTSD project.

The study will be lead by Dr. Cheryl Krause-Parello, Associate Professor in the School of Nursing and director of the Center for Nursing Research at Kean University, in collaboration with Col. Mona Pearl, director for the Pentagon’s Office of Air Force Reserve Medical Directorate in Washington, D.C.

The purpose of this randomized, repeated-measures study is to examine the psychobiological and behavioral interface between animal-assisted therapy (AAT) and stress indicators in wounded warriors receiving care at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC).

The central hypothesis is that AAT can reduce stress responses in wounded warriors who have returned from the war in Iraq or Afghanistan with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This hypothesis will be tested by measuring in vitro (salivary cortisol and immunoglobulin A (IgA)) and in vivo measures (blood pressure and pulse) before, after, and 30 minutes after a visit from a certified therapy dog and a session of routine care. The hypothesis will also be tested through an instruments packet consisting of surveys that measure combat exposure, perceived stress, coping ability, emotional and social loneliness, pet attitude, and health-related quality of life. Salivary cortisol levels and IgA will be measured by using a commercially-available, unstimulated saliva collection device, and will then be subjected to enzyme immunoassay (EIA) analysis. For the analyses in this research, the level of significance will be $p \leq .05$.

The expected outcomes of this proposal will address the hypothesis of whether the use of AAT can lead to an improved stress indicator response in wounded warriors, and will open new gateways to future research endeavors that will explore the long term benefits of AAT in other at risk military populations. This research will systematically address the gaps in our knowledge about the relationships between AAT, stress indicators, and well-being in wounded warriors. The long term aims of this research program are to mitigate stress responses through the use of AAT in combat survivors of war. It will also provide an understanding of an alternate therapeutic intervention that can help wounded warriors improve stress indicator responses in the acute care setting. Ultimately, this exploratory study could lead to the discovery of an innovative, evidence-based intervention that will improve stress indicator responses and the health and well-being of individuals in military populations.