

# Veterans in college seek comfort with four-legged friends

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Sarah Sell, director of veteran student services at Wichita State University in Kansas, cuddles with her rescue dog Riley, which she is training to be a therapy dog. Fernando Salazar/Wichita Eagle/TNS

The Riley Leroy Pitts Military and Veteran Student Center, at Wichita State University in Kansas, has a new therapist who has become quite a hit.

The therapist doesn't charge a fee. She doesn't ask about childhood memories or give advice. However, she does offer free cuddles.

At times, she likes to watch squirrels and play fetch.

## **Veteran Student Services**

The therapist, actually a therapy dog in training, is a friendly rescue pooch named Riley. Three-year-old yellow Labrador Riley lives with Sarah Sell, director of veteran student services at Wichita State.

Some students call Riley the center's official mascot. The center is named after U.S. Army Captain Riley Leroy Pitts. In 1968, he became the first black commissioned officer to receive the Medal of Honor.

"I think some of the draw to dogs and therapy dogs is that they don't care what kind of day you had. They love you no matter what," Sell said. "They just love that you're there to pet them. Our students really love having Riley here. They look for her."

### **Calm And Comfortable Around People**

Once they complete a training program, therapy dogs usually make visits to hospitals and therapy centers. The dogs need to be calm and comfortable around people in order to be certified and approved.

The veterans center is a room with a few tables, couches and a computer desk. Its director hopes a larger veterans center could be open next spring.

Riley goes from person to person, moving her head in for a snuggle or wanting to be petted. Erin Rust, a Wichita State junior who also works part-time at the center, said, "People can come in here upset about something that's going on in their life and after about 10 minutes around Riley, they feel better."

### **Veterans On Campus**

Sell said the university has about 800 students that were in the military. She said about 100 come through the center every day.

"Primarily, Riley is here to support our veterans on campus," Sell said. "Students sometimes come into my office and just curl up and cuddle with her before a big test. She helps people calm down a little bit. She's really had a positive impact."

Sell got her in May from Caring Hands Humane Society in Newton. Hopefully, Riley will be fully certified and approved as a therapy dog early next year. Sarah takes Riley to training once a week. She works with her at home, too.

Sell is still active in the Air National Guard. She feels the support of university president, John Bardo, has been very important.

### **Student Services For Military**

"Wichita State has worked to improve services overall for our military and veteran students," said Bardo. He added that having therapy dogs is important to helping keep students calm.

The university's support has been noticed. On Wednesday, Wichita State announced that two military organizations named it a top school for military members and veterans.

"I've had yellow Labs all my life, so I love having Riley around," said Bryan Casey, a Navy veteran and marketing major at Wichita State. "She makes campus feel more like home. You can come (to the veterans center) and just exhale, and she's a big part of that."