

TOPSHAM – After Scott Richard left the U.S. Air Force nearly 25 years ago, he experienced frequent bouts of panic and anxiety and, over time, started to avoid public places.

Three years ago, he was diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder, a condition that Topsham nonprofit Embrace a Vet characterizes as “an invisible wound” that affects 25-40 percent of veterans returning from recent military experience.

Richard sought help through programs at Embrace a Vet, which was founded in 2012 to help Maine veterans with a diagnosis of PTSD or traumatic brain injury.

According to information provided by the nonprofit's president, Deborah Farnham, Maine has the third-highest number of veterans in the country per capita, around 129,000.

Farnham oversees one of the organization's growing programs, Paws for Peace, a 16-week course that pairs veterans with dogs trained to become service animals at no cost to participants.

When the current session ends in March, the program will have graduated 38 dogs over two years.

Program participants attend a weekly class with instructors from Portland's North Edge K9, and spend an additional 120 hours throughout the entire course training their dogs.

The dogs provide more than companionship: as service animals, they learn to intercept triggers that incite symptoms of PTSD, like panic and anxiety, according to Farnham.

With a dog at their side, veterans are less likely to isolate themselves, which Farnham said is common for some veterans.

It was for Richard.

“Before (enrolling in Paws for Peace), I was pretty much a shut-in, or pretty close to it,” he said. “I wouldn't go out in public because I was always getting anxiety around large groups of people.”

He said that even a trip to Wal-Mart posed a threat. Holding a job was even harder.

Last year, Richard attended an Embrace a Vet retreat, where he found several other veterans with service dogs.

“I saw that the guys that had their dogs were a lot better,” he said in a phone interview from his home in Corinna on Tuesday. “None of them had the same thing I did.”

By the end of the retreat, he was enrolled in the Paws for Peace program at the University of Maine in Orono.

Some veterans enroll with a dog they've already adopted, and many are rescues. Richard was paired

with a 2-year-old Akita named Sherlock, with whom he instantly bonded.

For the first five weeks of class, Richard taught Sherlock what Farnham calls "canine good citizen behavior" - basics such as sit, stay, heel.

Farnham said because the idea is to train a dog to behave in crowded public settings, much attention is paid to teaching the animal to enter and exit rooms, and develop an unwavering obedience to its owner.

Around the five-week mark, the veterans begin to teach their animals specific commands.

"(Sherlock) is trained to key in on my anxiety and panic attacks," Richard said, and described how Sherlock knows to nudge and comfort Richard when an attack is coming on, which prevents a fullblown occurrence.

"Sometimes he'll pick up on them before I even notice I'm having them," he added.

He once told Farnham that Sherlock picked up on his rising anxiety as if it were a dog whistle, and came rushing in from another room to intercept the attack before Richard even realized what was happening.

A service dog is not a cure for PTSD, and Sherlock is only "part of (a) program" that Richard said includes regular therapy and support from his wife, Crystal.

But "having Sherlock helps keep my mind off of what's in my mind" and has dramatically increased his ability to interact with others.

He said that the two are inseparable - to a point where Crystal teases him.

"She kind of jokes around that the dog has kind of come between the two of us," he said.



Sherlock, a trained service dog, can anticipate U.S. Air Force veteran Scott Richard's symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder. The two participated in a 16-week Paws for Peace training program, founded by Topsham's Embrace a Vet.