

<http://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/palm-beach/fl-dog-for-veterans-20111219,0,6973313.story>

## South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com

### Military therapy dog reports for first day at work at VA Medical Center in West Palm

By [Alexia Campbell](#), Sun Sentinel  
7:03 PM EST, December 19, 2011  
Riviera Beach



Bruce's first day of work involved giving hugs and kisses to military veterans in wheelchairs.

The 2-year-old black Labrador retriever got the serious group to crack broad smiles on Monday during his first visit to the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center in Riviera Beach.

Vets Helping Heroes donated Bruce, a trained military therapy dog, to the hospital's nursing home. The [Boca Raton](#)-based nonprofit pays to have service dogs trained to care for disabled military veterans.

"They're going to have a great time with that dog," said the organization's founder, Irwin Stovroff, as he watched Bruce lick face after face at the nursing home.

Vets Helping Heroes raised \$10,000 to have Bruce trained for six months to provide therapy to the residents at the center. Hospital administrators asked Stovroff in February if he could find them a canine companion.

The hospital's chief of staff, Dr. Deepak Mandi, said service dogs such as Bruce help ward off depression and post-traumatic stress disorder among veterans.

"In the past, it's been very therapeutic," Mandi said. "The rate of healing increases."

U.S. Army Veteran Charles Filler laughed as Bruce crawled onto his wheelchair on Monday afternoon and licked his white beard repeatedly.

"That was tremendous," said Filler, 78, who served in Vietnam.

He said Bruce reminds him of his old, long-haired dachshund, Dusty, who traveled with him when he was stationed overseas. It will be great to see Bruce every day, he said.

The dog will "clock in" at 7:30 a.m., Monday through Friday, and will leave each day at 4 p.m., said his handler, Chaplain Gary Leopard. He will visit about 100 military vets live at the hospital's Community Living Center.

"On the weekends, it's play time [at my house]," said Leopard, who takes Bruce home each night.

Bruce started training for the job when he was 1-1/2. His trainer, Sam Agro, said he was rambunctious then, but soon learned how to behave around fragile adults. He was also exposed to alarms and loud noises like he might hear at the nursing home.

Agro, who works for Southeastern Guide Dogs in Palmetto, Fla. near St. Petersburg, has trained many military service dogs for Vets Helping Heroes.

The training can cost up to \$50,000, depending on the level of training needed. Some are trained as guide dogs for the blind. Other dogs help handicapped veterans keep their balance, fetch dropped items or carry a backpack.

Some dogs can even warn their owners when they are about to have a seizure.

Stovroff started Vets Helping Heroes in 2007 after discovering that there was no federal funding to provide service dogs to disabled veterans returning from Iraq. Since then, the organization has given 65 trained dogs to disabled veterans around the country.

Stovroff, a World War II veteran, flew B-24 Liberator bomber planes with the U.S. Air Force. One of his planes was gunned down in 1944 and Stovroff was held prisoner in Germany for more than a year.

[apcampbell@sunsentinel.com](mailto:apcampbell@sunsentinel.com), 561-243-6609 or twitter @alexiacampbell

Copyright © 2011, [South Florida Sun-Sentinel](#)