

The Florida Senate
BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Committee on Criminal Justice

BILL: SB 688

INTRODUCER: Senator Collins

SUBJECT: Canine Support Grant Program for First Responders

DATE: March 10, 2025

REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Vaughan	Stokes	CJ	
2.			ACJ	
3.			FP	

I. Summary:

SB 688 creates s. 943.701, F.S., the “Canine Heroes for First Responders Act” to create a canine support grant program for first responders. The program is to be administered jointly by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) and the Division of State Fire Marshall within the Department of Financial Services. The purpose of the program is to provide funding to law enforcement agencies and first responder agencies for the procurement, training and maintenance of support dogs, to enhance the mental health and wellness of personnel by providing support dogs that help reduce stress and improve emotional well-being in high-stress work environments.

The bill provides that grants awarded under the program must be used for specific purposes and the bill specifies the requirements for the support dogs, handlers, agency eligibility, the application process and oversight measures.

There is not a specific appropriation in the bill and the impact is indeterminate at this time. *See Section V. Fiscal Impact Statement.*

The bill takes effect on July 1, 2025.

II. Present Situation:

Post-traumatic stress (PTSD) is prevalent among law enforcement officers. Significant correlations have been found between years of service and traumatic events; traumatic events and post-traumatic stress symptoms; and traumatic events and worldview/perception of others.¹

¹ National Library of Medicine, *Police Stress and Deleterious Outcomes: Efforts Towards Improving Police Mental Health*, available at <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8575544/> (last visited March 6, 2025).

Thirty-five percent of police officers have PTSD, compared to 6.8 percent of the general population.²

Utilizing support dogs to boost mental wellness and resiliency is a concept that was inspired by the military for recovering service members for animal assisted therapy.³ For almost two decades, specially trained dogs have helped combat veterans cope with depression, anxiety and PTSD.⁴ Therapy dogs are also used in victim assistance programs, courts and medical settings especially children's hospitals. The St. Lucie County Fire District has three canines as part of a behavioral health program to help firefighters and first responders after stressful situations.⁵

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

The American Psychiatric Association provides diagnostic criteria for mental disorders, including PTSD, in its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5). PTSD is a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war, combat, rape, or other violent personal assault.

A diagnosis of PTSD requires exposure to an upsetting traumatic event; however, exposure can be indirect rather than first hand. Symptoms fall into the following four categories: intrusion, avoidance, alterations in cognition and mood, and alterations in arousal and reactivity. In order to diagnose a person with PTSD, symptoms must last for more than a month and must cause significant distress or problems in the individual's daily functioning. Many individuals develop symptoms within three months of the trauma; but symptoms may appear later and often persist for months and sometimes years. Further, PTSD often occurs with other related conditions, such as depression, substance use, memory problems and other physical and mental health problems.⁶

One study noted that the onset of PTSD symptoms is usually in the first month after the traumatic event; however, in about 15 percent of the cases, there may be a delay of months or years before symptoms appear. At least a third of the individuals who initially develop PTSD remain symptomatic for three years or longer and are at risk of secondary problems such as substance abuse.⁷

² Stella Mental Health, *Police Trauma Syndrome-Mental Health of Law Enforcement*, available at <https://stellamentalhealth.com/resources/10111/police-trauma-syndrome--mental-health-of-law-enforcement> (last visited March 6, 2025).

³ United States Department of Defense, *Guidance on the Use of Service Dogs by Service Members 1300.27* available at <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/130027p.pdf> (last visited March 5, 2025).

⁴ Police 1, *Healing paws: The rise of therapy dogs in law enforcement*, available at <https://www.police1.com/what-cops-want/healing-paws-the-rise-of-therapy-dogs-in-law-enforcement> (last visited March 5, 2025).

⁵ The Palm Beach Post, *Three therapy dogs training to help first responders at St. Lucie County Fire District*, Will Greenlee, available at <https://www.palmbeachpost.com/story/news/local/st-lucie-county/2025/02/13/therapy-dogs-help-first-responders-at-st-lucie-county-fire-district/78474843007/>, (last visited March 5, 2025).

⁶ American Psychiatric Association, *What is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?* available at <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd> (last visited March 5, 2025)

⁷ National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health (UK), *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: The Management of PTSD in Adults and Children in Primary and Secondary Care*, available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK56506/> (last visited March 5, 2025).

Emotional Support Animals

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), an emotional support animal is any animal that provides emotional support alleviating one or more symptoms or effects of a person's disability. Emotional support animals (ESA) provide companionship, relieve loneliness, and sometimes help with depression, anxiety, and certain phobias, but do not have special training to perform tasks that assist people with disabilities.⁸ Unlike a service animal, an ESA is not trained to work or perform certain tasks, but provides emotional support alleviating one or more symptoms or effects of a person's disability.⁹ The most common type of ESA is a dog; however, other species of animals may be an ESA. ESAs provide therapeutic support to relieve symptoms of psychiatric disabilities, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.¹⁰

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

The bill creates s. 943.701, F.S., the "Canine Heroes for First Responders Act" to create a canine support grant program for first responders. The program is to be administered jointly by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) and the Division of State Fire Marshall within the Department of Financial Services. The purpose of the program is to provide funding to law enforcement agencies and first responder agencies for the procurement, training and maintenance of support dogs, to enhance the mental health and wellness of personnel by providing support dogs that help reduce stress and improve emotional well-being in high-stress work environments.

The grants awarded under this section must be used to do all of the following:

- Procure support dogs that meet the specific requirements.
- Train handlers and establish effective support dog teams.
- Maintain the health, well-being, and training of the support dogs.
- Develop and implement law enforcement agency policies and first responder agency policies for the deployment and management of support dog teams.
- Support the establishment of training standards for handlers and support dog teams consistent with established best practices, with up to 10 percent of the awarded funds allocated to provide training on these standards.

A law enforcement agency or first responder agency applying for grants must meet eligibility requirements as follows:

- Require all support dog teams to pass the American Kennel Club Urban Canine Good Citizen Public Access Test or an equivalent standardized evaluation.
- Adopt and implement a policy indicating that support dogs are working animals specifically designated for mental health and wellness purposes
- Designate a program coordinator to oversee the implementation and evaluation of the support dog program.

⁸ ADA National Network, *Service Animal or Emotional Support Animal: What's the Difference?*, available at <https://adata.org/service-animal-resource-hub/differences> (last visited March 5, 2025).

⁹ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *FEHO Notice: FHEO-2013-01*, (available at https://archives.hud.gov/news/2013/servanimals_ntcfheo2013-01.pdf (last visited March 5, 2025).

¹⁰ Brazelon Center for Mental Health Law, *Right to Emotional Support Animals in "No Pet" Housing*, available at https://archives.hud.gov/news/2013/servanimals_ntcfheo2013-01.pdf, (last visited March 5, 2025).

- Submit an annual report to the department and the State Fire Marshal detailing the use, outcomes, and costs associated with the support dog program.
- Provide appropriate facilities and resources for the care and deployment of the support dogs.
- Develop training standards for handlers and support dog teams, consistent with established best practices and in collaboration with the department and the State Fire Marshall.

A law enforcement agency or first responder agency applying for a grant must submit an application that includes several key components. Applications should include a description of the proposed support dog program including a justification of need for the support dog program in the agency. Additionally, the application should include a budget for the use of grant funds, as well as a detailed allocation of up to 10 percent for training initiatives. Agencies must include policies and procedures for maintaining the health, welfare, and effectiveness of support dog teams.

A support dog procured under the grant program must meet all of the following requirements:

- Be spayed or neutered.
- Be medically cleared for support work by a licensed veterinarian, including up-to-date vaccinations.
- Exhibit a temperament conducive to support work, with no aggressive or overly protective behaviors.
- Demonstrate aptitude for support work, including being friendly, approachable, and people oriented.
- Meet height and weight standards outlined by the grant program, and measure between 20 and 30 inches at the withers, ensuring the dogs are large enough for easy interaction with people but not so large as to present kenneling and transportation issues.
- Have never received any form of aggression training at any stage of their lives.
- Demonstrate social behavior and trainability to a high degree of obedience control, as evidenced by having passed the American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizen test or by having been trained to an equivalent level.
- Successfully complete an evaluation by a professional training organization.
- Be at least one year of age to ensure sufficient maturity for support work.

Support dog handlers must meet requirements as outlined in the bill including:

- Be a full-time employee of the law enforcement agency or first responder agency receiving the grant.
- Complete certified handler training for working with support dogs, including public access and emotional support protocols.
- Demonstrate the ability to manage and care for a support dog in the workplace.
- Pass a background check confirming suitability to work in mental health and wellness roles.
- Commit to ongoing training and annual certification as a support dog handler.

The FDLE and the State Fire Marshal will monitor grantee compliance through periodic reviews and site visits. Additionally, grant recipients must submit an annual report detailing the outcomes and effectiveness of the support dog program. This report should include metrics such as employee satisfaction, reduction in stress levels, and participation rates of first responders.

The bill takes effect on July 1, 2025.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

The bill does not appear to require cities and counties to expend funds or limit their authority to raise revenue or receive state-shared revenues as specified by Article VII, s. 18, of the State Constitution.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

There is not a specific appropriation in the bill and the impact is indeterminate at this time.¹¹

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

¹¹ FDLE Agency Bill Analysis, *SB 688-Canine Support for First Responders* (on file with Senate Criminal Justice Committee)

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Statutes Affected:

943.701 This bill creates the following sections of the Florida Statutes: 943.701, F.S

IX. Additional Information:

A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Changes:

(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

None.

B. Amendments:

None.

This Senate Bill Analysis does not reflect the intent or official position of the bill's introducer or the Florida Senate.
