



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Timothy M. Kennedy

## In Light of Disturbing Local Reports of Housing Discrimination, Kennedy Proposes Bill to Strengthen Protections for Veterans with Therapy Dogs

TIMOTHY M. KENNEDY August 25, 2015

| ISSUE: **HOUSING, DISABILITY, VETERANS, HOUSING**



*Senator Stands with WNY Heroes & HOME to Outline New Bill Focused on Veterans Who Have Medically-Prescribed Therapy Animals to Help Treat Trauma*

*Kennedy Says it is Our Duty to Protect Those Who Have Served So Bravely to Protect Us*

BUFFALO, N.Y. – Senator Tim Kennedy (D-Buffalo) stood with Iraq War Veteran and President of WNY Heroes Chris Krieger, Scott Gehl of Housing Opportunities Made Equal

(HOME) and other local advocates today to outline newly-created legislation (S.6031) designed to strengthen protections for veterans and individuals with disabilities who rely on and own therapy dogs from housing discrimination. The bill strengthens New York State's Human Rights law, better aligning it with applicable federal laws.

The bill was created in response to a housing discrimination case that WNY Heroes and HOME brought to the senator's attention, which involved a veteran who served in Iraq and was prescribed a therapy dog to help ease his PTSD, but faced backlash from his landlord for having the dog in the home. Both organizations noted that his case was not uncommon, and that many veterans continue to experience discrimination nationwide for having these therapy animals, in part because many people don't understand that these are medically-prescribed animals and not pets. Kennedy saw a gap in the State's Human Rights law as it relates to housing protections for those with disabilities and especially those who rely on therapy animals in the home. Working in partnership with WNY Heroes and HOME, the senator has introduced S.6031 to close that gap and provide stronger protections.

"Our veterans served our country with utmost bravery, and when they've finally returned home, many of these therapy and service dogs offer the support they need to truly re-engage in civilian life," said **Senator Tim Kennedy**. "It is our duty to protect the rights of our military men and women, as they have protected us, to be safely and adequately housed when they return from overseas. It is outrageous and unacceptable for a landlord to discriminate against any individual simply for seeking the therapy they need and deserve. By bringing state law in line with federal law, we're fighting to protect the rights of our veterans and individuals with disabilities, and ensuring that landlords who do violate these rights are prosecuted to the full extent of the law."

"A veterans discrimination issue was brought to the Senator and his response was faster than calling 911," said **Chris Krieger, Iraq War veteran and founder of WNY Heroes**. "Our

community needs to understand that we all return home with injuries, injuries that are not always seen by others. Service dogs will continue to play a bigger role with veterans.”

"Each year, HOME fields a dozen or more reports from persons denied the right to have a service or emotional support animal because a landlord has adopted a "no pets" policy. Some of those clients have been returning veterans who—after fighting for our freedom—have been denied their own rights because they use a service animal to cope with the residual effects of the horrors of war,” said **Scott Gehl, Executive Director of HOME**. “On behalf of HOME and the thousands who turn to us for help each year, I want to commend Senator Kennedy for proposing this legislation, which will have the effect of clarifying definitions and rights and specifically asking state veterans service agencies to inform their clients of their rights against housing discrimination.”

"We owe a debt of gratitude to all our veterans, but we owe even more to those who return from service with injuries,” said **local veteran advocate and attorney Adam Perry**. “I want to thank Senator Kennedy for taking the lead in this effort to make sure the laws of New York protect all persons with disabilities, but especially our veterans.”

A 2011 Rand Corporation study shows that approximately 22 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans suffer from PTSD or combat related depression. A study by Stanford University projects that that number may increase to upwards of 35 percent in coming years.

This legislation works to correct the injustice these veterans face as a result of their use of therapy dogs to help treat a variety of illnesses, such as PTSD. Under this new legislation:

- State law is amended to clarify what qualifies as a disability.
- Language has been added to ensure service dogs of any breed and therapy dogs and cats are included under animals protected from unlawful discrimination.

- State law is amended to include personal residences as places under which therapy dogs and cats are protected.
- Explicitly requires the NYS Division of Veterans Affairs to provide information to veterans about housing services and what constitutes discrimination.

“As we head back to legislative session, getting this bill the attention it deserves will remain one of my top priorities,” added Kennedy. “Supporting our veterans isn’t a partisan issue. I truly believe that if my colleagues sit down for one conversation with a war hero like Chris Krieger, and they see what his service dog Bubba does to help him, this bill will gain the bipartisan support it needs to move forward.”

###