

DONATION

American Legion Auxiliary unit donates \$8K to Peoria organization

By Marge Christianson

SPECIAL TO INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The American Legion Auxiliary unit in Gilbert presented an \$8,000 check to Peoria-based Soldier's Best Friend, April 5—bringing the total contributed by Arizona Auxiliary units to nearly \$30,000.

Soldier's Best Friend pairs combat veterans with rescued companion dogs. The \$8,000 raised by the Gilbert Auxiliary unit is enough to pair two veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress or Traumatic Brain Injury with a companion dog—at no cost to the veteran.

The Arizona American Legion Auxiliary undertook Soldier's Best Friend as a special focus under the leadership of President Jan Cushing. Ms. Cushing, a Surprise resident and member of the Glendale Auxiliary, chose Soldier's Best Friend because it fills a critical need in Arizona—helping veterans suffering from their combat experience.

More than 20 veterans commit suicide in the U.S. every day, according to the Veterans Administration. Women veterans are twice as likely as their civilian counterparts to commit suicide.

“While supporting this organization, I have seen firsthand how a trained dog can add calm and meaning to a veteran”, Ms. Cushing said.

Training for each dog and veteran team takes six to nine months. The organization has graduated 170 teams and has



The American Legion Auxiliary unit in Gilbert presented an \$8,000 check to Peoria-based Soldier's Best Friend April 5. Left to Right: Jenna “Jay” Montoya (SBF), Jan Cushing (President, Department of Arizona, American Legion Auxiliary), Linda Silvas (President Unit 39, Gilbert), Cassie DeZeeuw (unit 39); Jeanette Seitzer (Unit 39, Veterans Affairs Chairman); Kelli Platke (unit 39); Margaret Ellis (unit 39); Kathy Jarzynka (unit 39); Bella (canine)

about 40 teams currently in training. Jenna “Jay” Montoya, event and volunteer coordinator, said there are plans to double that capacity.

The Peoria facility already has a large open training space and yard, but does not yet have a kennel room which is now in the planning stage.

“We are so lucky to have the support of local organizations,” Ms. Montoya said. “We have an Eagle Scout making picnic tables for the yard area. Goodyear and Luke AFB canine officers are assisting in training and even a local airline donated seats to assist with travel training.”

The Gilbert unit raised the \$8,000 by conducting breakfast and dinner events since last July. They also sold merchandise to local residents.

“We are a small, but pas-

sionate auxiliary unit—always looking for new members, organizations and businesses who want to support our patriotic mission. Unit President Linda Silva said.

The American Legion Auxiliary is the largest women's patriotic organization in the world and has 15,000 members in Arizona. Last year, Arizona members volunteered more than 175,000 hours of service to veterans. Arizona units contributed thousands of hours of service to the Veteran Health Care System in Phoenix, Prescott and Tucson. For more information visit ALADEPTAZ.com or contact us at ALADEPTAZ@gmail.com

Editor's note: Ms. Christianson is a public relations volunteer for American Legion Auxiliary, John J Morris Unit 62, in Peoria.