

# localnews

HEALTH CARE: Gallant welcomes advocate of equine therapy

## Innovative approach

OTTAWA — Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke MP Cheryl Gallant was pleased recently to welcome Renfrew County resident Alison Vandergragt to appear before the Standing Committee on National Defence regarding equine therapy in the care of injured members of the Canadian Forces.

"As a member of the Standing Committee on National Defence, it was my pleasure recently to welcome Mrs. Alison Vandergragt to Ottawa. Alison is the program director of Hope Reins Equine Assisted Therapy Programs, Vanderbrook Farm, Killaloe. The Defence Committee is currently doing a study of the care of ill and injured members of the Canadian Forces.

"We are always looking for ways to improve the health care of any soldier suffering with mental illness," stated Ms. Gallant. "With the broad variety of different approaches that are currently being offered, starting with our 'Road to Mental Readiness' program, I encourage our military to support some type of pilot project in equine therapy."

Edited Hansard Standing Committee on National Defence:

Alison Vandergragt (Program Director, Hope Reins Equine Assisted Therapy Programs, Vanderbrook Farm): "First of all, Mr. Chair, honourable members of Parliament, and distinguished guests, I am very honoured to be here and share something that is such a passion in my heart. I was a navy wife for 10 years, and horses have always been an important part of my life, so integrating them in something that has such benefit is something that's been very close to my heart.

"I am the program director at Hope Reins. I've been an avid natural horsemanship student for a number of years, and I'm fascinated with the psychology of the horse. I started to realize that there was a connection between how horses thought and how they reacted to situations, and I started relating that to how we react with our own situations and relationships in our families. I found ways in which I could communicate with my horse, and I was very effective, but I wasn't so effective at home, so I started practising some of the principles there that I used with my horse. In my situation as a mother, I found that because we rely so much on verbal communication, when we start using some non-verbal communication, things go a lot more smoothly.

"I've worked in community and long-term health care for 20 years. I met a lot of clients who had unresolved mental health issues. Addressing them went



Submitted photo

Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke MP Cheryl Gallant speaking with Alison Vandergragt at Petawawa's Showcase. Ms. Vandergragt appeared before the Standing Committee on National Defence regarding equine therapy in the care of injured members of the Canadian Forces.

way beyond the scope of my practice and not being able to be part of the solution always caused me some distress. I eventually experienced my own very deep personal loss and I started to examine the connection between my own recovery and the role my horses played in my emotional healing. I began to wonder if horses could be part of the therapeutic process as well. I found from my own experience, this has been very true.

"I want to leave you today with maybe a better understanding of how horses are used in therapy. Whether programs are conducted in the saddle or on the ground, equine-assisted therapy is a phenomenal choice for treating PTSD. The bond between horses and humans is ancient. Using horses in this type of program is a natural extension of that long-standing relationship. I ask that you strongly consider any and all of the equine-assisted concepts for use with our military personnel."

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke, Conservative): "First of all, Mrs. Vandergragt, you work with families and with children who have emotional, psychological difficulties, including military families. Within

some of these military families, one of the parents can be a soldier or is a soldier who does suffer from PTSD. Could you describe your observations of how this affects the family?"

Ms. Alison Vandergragt: (Program Director, Hope Reins Equine Assisted Therapy Programs, Vanderbrook Farm): "Keep in mind that when we're talking about equine assisted psychotherapy, these sessions take place with a mental health professional present who has partnered with us for programming through an agency. This is always done with another agency. Approximately 35% of the clients we've seen in this past year, and 50% of the clients from a pilot project that we did a year ago with the Phoenix Centre, involved military families.

"Usually the children are coming in with some behavioural issues that we're looking to address. I'm very pro-family. We can make some little changes in the child, helped by the use of the horses in the program, but when the child goes back into the home, it's very hard for them to start integrating some of the new skills they've learned, such as the new coping skills and, the new communication and relationship things they've

learned in the session. So we quite often get the family involved.

"For the most part, the military families were very game to come to programming with their children, but some of the activities are high energy and there's a lot going on. What we've found is that we're supposed to be there for the child and helping with some issues, but we're seeing something else. There's something else in that arena that we're not addressing, and we call that the elephant in the arena: that elephant is the mental health issues that the parent is facing on his or her own—obviously stress-related.

"So we're putting on band-aids and we're getting little fixes here, but there's this big elephant that we're not even allowed to talk about or discuss: why the parent is so stressed and the factors for this family's disintegrating. We can put on these little band-aids and give little tips on how to work together as a family, but really, there's an issue here that is not being addressed, and that is a concern for someone like me. We could be doing much better in these programs if we were actually able to address the PTSD."