

TESTIMONY OF  
U.S. REPRESENTATIVE JAMES P. McGOVERN (MA-02)

SUBCOMMITTEE ON DEFENSE  
HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

FISCAL YEAR 2016 APPROPRIATIONS  
DEFENSE HEALTH PROGRAMS

I want to thank Chairman Frelinghuysen and Ranking Member Visclosky for allowing me this opportunity to testify today in support of funding a competitive grant program for nonprofits that train service dogs for our veterans. Specifically, I ask the Committee to support a \$5 million request for the Wounded Warriors Service Dog grant program.

In addition, I request the Committee to insert language addressing the benefits of canine therapy for the treatment of PTSD and TBI symptoms. I will include this language with my official statement.

I also want to express my gratitude to the Chairman and Ranking Member for their assistance in securing the initial funding for this program during the FY15 appropriations process. Last year this program was awarded \$1 million and we are hoping to build upon that initial funding and continue to grow this competitive grant program.

Mister Chairman, so many of our veterans are returning from war bearing both physical and emotional scars, we must do what we can to ensure that they have access to treatments that work. Service dogs have shown to have a positive effect on the treatment of PTSD and TBI symptoms, and it is not coincidental that we have seen a significant growth in demand for the service dogs as more of our veterans are returning home in need of this assistance.

During the last Congress I had the opportunity to visit the National Education for Assistance Dog Services – or NEADS – located in Princeton, Massachusetts, I heard amazing stories about how service dogs are helping to treat veterans with physical disabilities, as well as those suffering from post-traumatic stress. This nonprofit organization has connected many deserving veterans with service dogs over the past few years with incredible results.

In the last few years NEADS, like many of the other nonprofits providing this crucial service, have struggled to meet these growing levels of demand. Many nonprofits that train dogs for use by veterans are underfunded. The cost of training a service dog varies, but estimates range between \$15,000 and \$60,000 per dog, and training can take up to two years. Too often does a veteran's need for a service dogs often unmet due to financial constraints. This competitive grant will help ease the increased financial burden that these organizations are facing.

In January, the VA launched a study on the potential benefits of service dogs for individuals with PTSD, they expect this study to end sometime during 2018 or 2019. But, if you

sit down with just a handful of our veterans who have received a service dog for PTSD, it will become as clear as day how helpful these dogs are.

Mister Chairman, with so many of our are veterans coming home from war suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and other physical disabilities, it is critical that we offer them multiple treatment options. Connecting veterans with lifesaving service dogs should be one of those comprehensive care options.

I ask this Committee and my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to this competitive grant program at the levels requested for FY 2016 so that our veterans can receive the treatment they deserve.

## **Language Request for FY 16 Defense Appropriations**

“The committee is aware that canine therapy for treatment of PTSD and TBI symptoms is a promising alternative or adjunct to pharmaceutical treatment, which can have harmful side-effects. In testimony before Congress, witnesses from the Services were positive about the potential for this treatment, calling canine therapy for PTSD "an emerging area of alternative therapy" that is "beneficial in the support of people with either physical or mental health diagnoses," and that can "help reduce anxiety, lower emotional reactivity, and provide a sense of security." While still experimental, canine therapy has shown effectiveness in treating PTSD and other psychological disorders, from hospitalized psychiatric patients to children with developmental disorders, patients with substance abuse problems, and victims of trauma. The Services' report that service members who participate in their canine programs for PTSD and TBI show more positive social interactions, a decrease in suicidal thoughts, an increased sense of safety, independence, motivation, and self-efficacy. The committee notes that canine therapy is a promising area for further research as a complementary or alternative treatment for the signature wounds of the ongoing conflict. Therefore, the committee provides funds and continues to encourage the Services to initiate or expand their research into canine therapy to validate its therapeutic effectiveness in the treatment of PTSD and TBI.”