

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

SUBCOMMITTEE ON DEFENSE
HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

FISCAL YEAR 2018 APPROPRIATIONS
DEFENSE HEALTH PROGRAMS

I want to thank Chairwoman Granger 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 that the Committee 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 Subcommittee for their assistance in securing funding for this program in FY15 and FY16. Already, we have seen so many incredible success stories in which these dogs have helped veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress or physical limitations to reintegrate into the social framework of their families and communities and often reduce their reliance on prescription drugs. Continuing to fund this program at \$5 million a year would allow awardees to continue this all-important work. That being said, even with this grant program, many nonprofits continue to have waiting lists of veterans in need of service dogs. Given that FY18 will likely see an increase in defense spending, my hope is that this

Subcommittee will consider appropriating more than \$5 million to grow this already-successful program.

Madam Chair, with so many of our veterans returning from war bearing both physical and emotional scars, we must ensure that they have access to treatments that work. Service dogs have been shown to have a positive effect on the treatment of PTSD and TBI symptoms, and it is not a coincidence 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.

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. Like other similar non-profits, NEADS customizes the training of each dog to serve its future owner. Depending on the owner's needs, these dogs can be trained to retrieve medicine from a refrigerator, turn the lights on and scan an empty house before the owner enters, guard an owner's back in a public setting, and even wake an owner up from a nightmare.

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, a

veteran's need for a service dog goes unmet due to financial constraints. This competitive grant, awarded only to organizations that meet the standards of either the International Guide Dog Federation or Assistance Dogs International, will allow nonprofits to help more veterans.

Congress first directed the VA to research the effect of service dogs on veterans with PTSD in 2010. This study was suspended in 2012 due to complications. In 2015, the VA launched a new version of the study that will conclude in 2018. Meanwhile, the demand amongst veterans for service dogs continues to grow as research conducted by private institutions such as Purdue University increasingly demonstrates that service dogs can help treat symptoms of PTSD. In addition to these studies, I guarantee that if you sit down with a veteran who has received a service dog for PTSD, it will become perfectly clear how helpful these dogs are.

Madam Chair, 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. While the VA continues its exhaustive research on the topic, we have wounded veterans who attribute their recoveries to service dogs and other veterans for whom a service dog could be the key. Rather than relegating these veterans to a waiting list, let's continue to support these highly technical non-profits so that they can continue to do what they do best – help our veterans.

I ask this Committee and my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to fund this competitive grant program at the levels requested for FY 2018 so that our veterans can receive the treatment they deserve.

Language Request for FY 18 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.”