

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

SUBCOMMITTEE ON DEFENSE
HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

FISCAL YEAR 2019 APPROPRIATIONS
DEFENSE HEALTH PROGRAMS AND OTHER PROGRAMS

I want to thank Madam Chair Granger and Ranking Member Visclosky for allowing me this opportunity to testify in support of the Wounded Warrior Service Dog Program. I would also like to thank the Chair, the Ranking Member, and the Committee for supporting an increase to this Program in Fiscal Year 2018. I ask that the Committee continue to fund this program at \$10 million in Fiscal Year 2019.

In addition, I request that the Committee insert language addressing the benefits of canine therapy for the treatment of PTSD and TBI symptoms. I have included draft language for your consideration at the end of my formal written statement.

I want to express my gratitude to the Subcommittee for their assistance in securing funding for this program since FY15. 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.

Over the past few years, I've had the opportunity to spend time at the National Education for Assistance Dog Services – or NEADS – located in Princeton, Massachusetts. Like other similar non-profits, NEADS customizes the training of each dog to serve its future owner. 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 up an owner from a nightmare.

Nonprofits like NEADS are struggling to meet the growing levels of demand. Thanks to your support, the Wounded Warrior Service Dog Program has allowed these non-profits to help hundreds of additional veterans over the past three years, yet we continue to see long waiting lists of service members in need.

Congress first directed the VA to research the effect of service dogs on veterans with PTSD in 2010. Eight years later, the VA is still conducting research. 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. Moreover, I guarantee that if you sit down with a veteran who has received a service dog, it will become perfectly clear how helpful these dogs are.

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 professional non-profits so that they can continue to do what they do best – help our veterans.

I would also like to testify today in support of a military service medal to honor retired and former members of the Armed Forces who are radiation-exposed veterans. I ask that the Committee provide \$250,000 for the creation and distribution of the **Atomic Veterans Service Medal**.

Last fall, for the third consecutive year, an amendment to create this Medal was dropped from the NDAA Conference Report. I find this particularly shocking as this amendment, which I offered with my Republican colleague, Congressman Tom Emmer, was approved by the House by a unanimous vote of 424-0. The House has shown strong support for the Atomic Veterans Service Medal, and now I ask that this Subcommittee provide the necessary funding to honor these Veterans.

Between 1945 and 1962, about 225,000 members of our Armed Forces participated in hundreds of nuclear weapons tests. These GIs were placed in extremely dangerous areas and were constantly exposed to dangerous levels of radiation in performance of their duties. They were sworn to secrecy, unable to even talk to their doctors about their past exposure to radiation.

Thankfully, Presidents Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush recognized the Atomic Veterans' valiant service, and acted to provide specialized care and compensation for their harrowing duty. In 2007, our allies Great Britain, New Zealand and Australia authorized and awarded medals to honor their Atomic Veterans who served with the United States.

Regrettably, the Pentagon remains silent on honoring the service of our Atomic Veterans, arguing that to do so would diminish the service of other military personnel who are tasked with dangerous missions. Madam Chair, I think this is a pitiful excuse.

Tragically, more than 75 percent of Atomic Veterans have already passed away, never having received this recognition. They served honorably and kept a code of silence that most certainly led to many of these veterans passing away prematurely.

Past Administrations and Congresses have dealt with the thornier issues of legality and compensation. What remains is recognizing these veterans' duty, honor and faithful service to

our nation. And time is running out. I ask that you include the modest sum of \$250,000 to create and confer the Atomic Veterans Service Medal.

Thank you for your consideration of these two requests.

Language Request for FY 19 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.”