

**JOINT TESTIMONY OF
U.S. REPRESENTATIVE JAMES P. MCGOVERN (MA)
U.S. REPRESENTATIVE RANDY HULTGREN (IL)**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON LEGISLATIVE BRANCH
HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
MAY 3, 2017**

Chairman Yoder and Ranking Member Ryan, as the Co-Chairs of the bipartisan Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, we appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to request that language be added to the Fiscal Year 2018 Legislative Branch appropriations bill that would provide \$230,000 for salaries and expenses for professional staff for the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, an official bipartisan body of the House of Representatives.

The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission was established during the 110th Congress pursuant to House Resolution 1451, adopted unanimously on September 24, 2008. The Commission's authorization has been renewed by every Congress since, most recently in House Resolution 5, the rules of the House for the 115th Congress, approved on January 3, 2017.

The Commission has its origins in the bipartisan Congressional Human Rights Caucus (CHRC), founded in 1983 by Congressmen John Edward Porter (R-IL) and Tom Lantos (D-CA). It was after the death of founding CHRC Co-Chairman Lantos, the only Holocaust survivor ever to serve in the United States Congress, and in his honor, that the initiative was taken to institutionalize a unique bipartisan entity in the House of Representatives to educate Members and promote international human rights.

The Commission is led by two Co-Chairs, one appointed by the Speaker of the House and the other by the Minority Leader. Any member of the House of Representatives may join the Commission at no cost. During the 114th Congress, a total of 103 Members of Congress joined the Commission, nearly one quarter of the membership of the House.

In keeping with the establishment resolution, the charge of the Commission is to “promote and advocate in a nonpartisan manner, both within and outside of Congress, internationally recognized human rights norms as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other relevant international human rights instruments by carrying out the following activities:

“(1) Developing congressional strategies to promote, defend, and advocate internationally recognized human rights norms reflecting the role and responsibilities of the Congress.

“(2) Raising greater awareness among Members of the House of Representatives, their staffs, and the public regarding international human rights violations and developments.

“(3) Providing Members and staff with expert human rights advice and information and by supporting entities of Congress in their work on human rights issues.

“(4) Advocating on behalf of individuals and entities whose internationally recognized human rights have been violated or are in danger of being violated.

“(5) Collaborating closely with other professional staff members of the Committee on Foreign Affairs.

“(6) Collaborating closely with the President, other officials of the executive branch, and recognized national and international human rights entities and nongovernmental organizations in promoting human rights initiatives within Congress.

“(7) Encouraging and supporting Members, especially Members who have been recently elected to the House, to become active in supporting human rights issues so that the United States will continue to be recognized throughout the world as a leader in the defense of internationally recognized human rights norms.”

In carrying out its broad mandate, which is also global in scope, the Commission is authorized to use the resources of the Committee on Foreign Affairs. We would like to take this opportunity to express our appreciation to the Foreign Affairs Committee for funding administrative expenses for the Commission, including office space and supplies, computers, and the costs of video recording and transcription of hearings. These resources are invaluable, and have been and continue to be very important to the Commission’s success.

What is missing, however, is funding for professional staff. The establishment resolution provided that professional staff members nominated by the Co-Chairs of the Commission would be appointed by the Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs [H. Res. 1451, 2008, Section 5(b)(1)]. To make sure that the appointment of Commission staff would not be a burden on the Committee, nor interfere in any way with the Committee’s own staffing needs, the resolution specified that full-time staff appointed for the Commission would not be counted in determining the total number of professional staff members the Committee may hire under House rules [H. Res. 1451, 2008, Section 5(b)(2)]. But no funds were specifically designated or appropriated for the Commission, and no funding for staff assigned full-time to the Commission was allocated in the 113th or the 114th Congresses.

It is for that reason that we are here today to request a new provision be added to the Legislative Branch appropriations bill to finance salaries and expenses for professional staff for the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in the amount of \$230,000 for FY2018. In keeping with the establishment resolution, the funds would be administered through the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Including this provision would be consistent with the preference expressed by the Honorable Ed Royce, Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, before the House Administration Committee during the 113th Congress:

“Mr. ROYCE. ...I would also like to express my concern that the budget of this committee includes the salary and administrative expenses for the House Democracy Partnership, as well as the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. **I believe that both of these entities should be funded independently** [emphasis added].”¹

Mr. Chairman, beginning in the early 1970s, Congress has led the U.S. government to support fundamental human freedoms as a core part of its foreign policy. The need for Congressional support of fundamental freedoms around the world has never been greater: from Azerbaijan to Venezuela and from Congo to Yemen, rights and freedoms are being restricted for millions of people, directly impacting important U.S. foreign policy objectives and decisions.

The bipartisan Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission complements the traditional work of standing congressional committees, including the House Foreign Affairs Committee, by holding hearings and briefings on issues that transcend the jurisdiction and interests of multiple committees and subcommittees, and covering topics that the standing committees do not have time to cover. Foreign governments pay close attention to the Commission’s hearings and briefings, which also serve as an important platform for civil society from the United States and from around the world to share with Congress its concerns and expertise. The Commission also helps focus the efforts of its members in support of fundamental freedoms and the most basic rights of life, liberty and freedom from torture or government-led repression around the world.

During the 114th Congress, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held 22 hearings and more than 40 briefings on topics ranging from religious freedom to concrete steps that can be taken to protect civilians in Syria. Due to a lack of dedicated funding for professional staff, the Commission has done this work and served its bipartisan members through a rotating patchwork of temporary fellows and volunteers. The modest request we are making today would allow each

¹ U.S. Congress, House Committee on House Administration, *Committee Funding for the 113th Congress (Day 1)*, 113th Congress, 1st Session, March 5, 2013 (Washington: GPO, 2013), pp. 126, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-113hrg80285/pdf/CHRG-113hrg80285.pdf>, accessed April 27, 2017.

Co-Chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission to hire dedicated full time professional personnel, thus greatly increasing the Commission's effectiveness, reinforcing its expertise, and amplifying Congress' important voice on human rights and foreign policy.

Thank you for your considered attention to this bipartisan request.