

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

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON LEGISLATIVE BRANCH
HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
APRIL 17, 2017**

Chairman Yoder and Ranking Member Ryan, as the Co-Chairs of the bipartisan Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, we thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to request that language be added to the Fiscal Year 2019 Legislative Branch appropriations bill to 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.

We previously appeared before the Subcommittee and presented this request during the FY 2018 appropriations cycle. We were encouraged by the report language the Subcommittee issued after reviewing our testimony:

“Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission: The Committee received testimony regarding the outstanding work of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission done with very limited resources. The Committee is supportive of the commission’s request for additional dedicated resources and is willing to work with the Committee on House Administration to identify potential additional resources for the commission.”¹

This past March we learned that the House Administration Committee had acted favorably on our request by authorizing the use of \$200,000 from the Reserve Fund for the remainder of calendar year 2018. Those funds became available on April 2, 2018. As a result, we have been able to hire senior professional staff to sustain the Commission’s activities for nine months, through December 2018.

Our request today builds on that favorable decision, while reiterating our request to regularize funding for the Commission at the slightly higher figure that will be needed for salaries and expenses for a full fiscal year.

Background on the Commission

By way of background, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission is a unique bipartisan entity dedicated to educating Members and staff and promoting international human rights. Named in honor of former congressman Tom Lantos, the only Holocaust survivor ever to serve in the United States Congress, it was established during the 110th Congress pursuant to House Resolution

¹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Legislative Branch Appropriations Bill, 2018*, 115th Congress, 1st Session, Report 115-199, July 6, 2017, p. 5.

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 is led by two co-equal 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 115th Congress, more than 60 Members of Congress have joined the Commission.

As stated in the authorizing legislation, the mission 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.”

The Commission's bipartisan work complements that 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.

To date during the 115th Congress, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission has programmed 15 public hearings and 13 public briefings that have examined country situations as well as thematic issues such as the need for international prison reform and accountability for grave human rights abuses. A large number of staff-only briefings and private meetings have been organized as key human rights figures have come to the Hill. The Commission has also cooperated in hosting film screenings, special exhibits and training opportunities for congressional staff.

Rationale for the funding request

In carrying out its broad global mandate, the Commission is authorized to use the resources of the Committee on Foreign Affairs. The Committee has been generous in 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 we are deeply appreciative of the Committee's support.

What has been missing historically, however, is funding for professional staff.

The establishment resolution provides that professional staff members nominated by the Co-Chairs of the Commission will 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 specifies that full-time staff appointed for the Commission will 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 until this year, no funds had been specifically designated or appropriated for the Commission. No funding for staff assigned full-time to the Commission was allocated in the 113th or the 114th Congresses. The 115th Congress is the first time that funds have been explicitly provided to staff the Commission. Previously, the Commission has done its work and served its bipartisan members through a rotating patchwork of temporary fellows and volunteers.

Today we are seeking to ensure that equivalent funding is available for FY2019, and more generally to regularize the funding stream for the Commission.

Our modest request will allow us as co-chairs to hire or maintain 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.

Justification for directing the request to the Legislative Branch Subcommittee

One question that has been raised is why not pursue this request through the Committee on House Administration and the Committee on Foreign Affairs. This is a reasonable question that we would answer in two ways. First, we believe that funding for the Commission should not come at the expense of the standing committees. The Commission deserves funding, but we are not seeking to harm other committees in the process.

Second, Mr. Royce, as Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, has previously expressed his view that the Commission should be funded independently of the Committee. Speaking before the House Administration Committee during the 113th Congress, Chairman Royce stated:

“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].”²

For these reasons, we suggest adding a new provision 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 FY2019. In keeping with the establishment resolution, the funds would be administered through the House Foreign Affairs Committee. This approach would regularize the funding stream for the Commission, and would be similar to the procedure used to fund, for example, the John C. Stennis Center for Public Service Training and Development.

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 Burma to Venezuela, in Syria, Yemen and Turkey, on behalf of beleaguered religious and ethnic communities in far too many places. Restrictions on rights and freedoms for millions of people directly impact important U.S. foreign policy and national security objectives and decisions. The Commission plays an important role in keeping these issues on the congressional agenda.

Thank you for your considered attention to this bipartisan request.

² 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-113hhrg80285/pdf/CHRG-113hhrg80285.pdf>, accessed April 27, 2017.