My name is Matthew Corso. I founded California Service Dog Academy ("CSDA") with my wife, Rebecca, in December 2017. In the five years since we founded California Service Dog Academy, we have placed over forty (70) service animals to veterans. CSDA will finish this year having placed over one hundred (100) service animals with veteran and civilian populations and raising above $2,000,000. However, none of this would have come to fruition without a brief understanding of how I got here and how it has affected me daily.

The worlds of non-profits and community services were not inherent in my life until I met my wife in 2015. In our courtship, Rebecca explained that she ran a one-person non-profit with the mission to train dogs to assist environmental conservation efforts. In the years leading up to CSDA's founding, Rebecca and I married, started a successful for-profit dog training business and blended our families. Then, in December 2017, I answered an inbound inquiry call with a message that was beginning to become more frequent. A veteran had called in seeking basic help training his dog to be a service animal because he could not afford the $30,000 that professional service animal providers were charging. He could not wait for over two years on a waitlist. His story of war, tragedy, and the psychological effects of the war was heartfelt but not something our business could help him overcome. As a result, I had to turn him away with a burning sense of discontent. After that call, Rebecca and I spoke about this trend of veterans seeking assistance. Within a minute, we started filing paperwork to start CSDA in the hopes that we could give a single service animal to one veteran per year. Little did we realize the effect was about to have on our lives and the community.

Naïve to the industry, and about a month after filing our paperwork, we were amassing an extensive client waitlist filled with veterans that needed help. We decided to do what we could to help more than one veteran a year, so I started looking for money. I stumbled upon a grant for the Wounded Warrior Service Dog Program, funded by the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences and the Department of Defense. This program was defined as a program for non-profits wherein the U.S. Government would grant monies provided the service animals were given free and met through an inspection. We applied for $198,000 with a well-thought-out business plan and returned to work on our first client. We received a shocking letter four months later granting the total amount requested. To this point, my definition of service work was volunteering as an aide in my children's classroom for two hours every other week. It was fun, the hour's commitment was small and short-lived, and it was valuable for the kids and myself, but it provided a tangible benefit that did not exist outside my children's classroom. After our first year running CSDA, my definition of service work became vastly different from when I entered the service animal industry.

Rebecca and I did everything for the first three years of CSDA's operation. Rebecca was the Head Trainer on a small salary, and I was the volunteer Executive Director. Our roles covered everything from standing up for the organization to training dogs and people. We built all the processes and procedures, developed and conducted classroom and individual people and dog training, and held our clients' hands as we sat in their homes and listened to their stories to celebrate their notable life changes after graduation. Very quickly, my definition of service learning and work went from simple volunteerism in a classroom to helping people overcome personal barriers in life. This change of thinking and the growth of the business brought many new challenges for me personally, CSDA, and our clients. More and more, my role shifted to breaking down the various client barriers and civil rights challenges to operational strategy and the tactical challenges associated with running a service animal organization.

In the five years since CSDA's founding, I have had the privilege and honor of working with each of our graduated handlers as they overcame significant personal barriers preventing them from regularly participating in the community. As a result of the handler's barriers coming down, I have seen them and their families build stronger bonds, return to work and school, improve their overall health, and have a more positive attitude, all while watching communities gather in support.

As a result of my volunteering my time at CSDA, my areas of operations and contributions over the years have been in the following areas; Federal and State non-profit and corporate filings and compliance, Veterans Affairs code and compliance, HIPAA code and compliance, Employer code and compliance, finance, disability rights, Mental and Behavioral Health standards and practices, grant making and writing, animal behavior, animal training, community events, the never-ending Federal, State, and local statutes, public speaking and education, and community leadership to name a few.

Reflecting on my last five years volunteering at CSDA, I can only say it was life-changing. Never in my wildest imagination did I envision I could positively affect people like CSDA does. It is humbling that I can proudly say that: I had the opportunity to start a non-profit, raise over $2,000,000 for the cause, help over 100 clients and their families, give away 100 service animals for free, go back to school to get a B.S. degree so I could enroll at Concord Law to one day give back pro bono legal services to our clients, create a legacy charity for the community, and make so many new friends. It has been an emotional five years, and despite my personal life and challenges, I hope to continue serving for as long as possible.