Statement for the U.S. Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship

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Chairwoman, Ranking Member, and members of the Senate Small Business Committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today and tell you a little more about my journey as an entrepreneur and small business owner in the pet industry.

My name is **Robert Van Sickle**, and I am the co-founder of Polkadog, a Boston-based dog and cat treat manufacturer, distributor, wholesaler, e-commerce and brick and mortar retailer.

Like most American small businesses, Polkadog started humbly, with an idea, and not enough common sense to think it couldn't possibly succeed. Our vision seemed simple, make the best dog and cat treats we could and use our neighborhood shop to create a place where the people of the South End could come meet one another and form a community. Easy, right? We had absolutely no idea what we were doing. That was 2002.

Fast forward to today, Polkadog is celebrating our 24th year in business, we operate a 14,000sqft commissary on the Boston fish Pier where we manufacture and distribute our branded products to independent pet retailers, gift shops, and grocery stores around the world. We have two warehouses in Canton Massachusetts that house and support our direct to consumer e-commerce business, polkadog.com, and own and operate 11 retail locations in the Boston area and beyond. We have a team of about 100 people.

By all accounts an undeniable success. And I would agree. But one thing it has not been is easy. In fact, despite our longevity and growth, and how our company might look to someone from the outside, within the walls we still operate very much as the small business we were on day one: constantly looking for ways to optimize and streamline operations, innovate and be creative problem solvers to minimize costs and mitigate risk, and the age old question of how to obtain access to fair and flexible capital. As most small businesses owners can attest, the line between success and failure is never far away, and so we are hard wired to always look for ways to do more, with less.

But what before might have been a worry if George would show up for work this time ? Or, that we needed to call a plumber for the clogged toilet, now looks more like: how do we compete to keep our brand relevant in the increasingly competitive, and much more significantly funded, multi billion dollar pet industry. How are we going to balance wage considerations with rising utility costs and health insurance premium increases? Can we

finally afford to match our employee's 401K plans this year? How do we attract talent and continue to innovate when many days it feels like we're swimming just to keep our heads above water.

None of these are questions easily answered, particularly when the answers themselves, like increasing prices to our customers, create other problems altogether. After all, there comes a point when we simply can't run any leaner or ask our customers to pay any more. There is a floor, and a ceiling.

At Polkadog, we've always believed in the power of American small business to not only be successful but also do good. It's the foundation of how we started and how we think about the world and operate every day. We believe in building a company that manufactures itself, and does so thoughtfully with sustainable and responsible sourcing of our raw materials, one that creates jobs and pays employees fair and livable wages, one that builds relationships in our communities, supports local economies, and gives back to the neighborhoods that support us. We believe in doing things the right way, which more often than than not, is also not the easy way.

What small businesses like ours need most is stability — predictability and peace of mind to plan investments, hire workers, grow methodically, to know and be able to say we can support our teams and their families, to know we can support our own families, to know that our hard work will pay off, that we can make a difference, for our team, for our local neighborhood, and far beyond. More than anything, I believe we have done just that, now here, on day 8500.

I'm proud of what Polkadog has become — a company that grew from one store on one street corner in one city in America to a global manufacturer, wholesaler, and retailer serving dogs and cats and people around the world. Apart from being a husband and father, being an entrepreneur has been the most challenging, interesting, humbling, heartbreaking, thrilling and magically curious journey I could have imagined for my life. I am grateful every day for the opportunities and lessons it has afforded and for my team and customers and all those that have supported us along the way. We would not have made it a week without that help. But here we are, on day 8500.

What an amazing gift, to be able to build a house out of thin air, and have complete strangers help you raise the roof. I don't know any other place in the world where that kind of thing is possible.

We are the American small business story. Tomorrow is day 8501. And I can't wait to get back to work.

Thank you for the opportunity to share what I've learned. I look forward to your questions.