

VETERANS INITIATIVE 22

Because We C.A.R.E

Testimony on Maryland House Bill 0296:

TO: Delegate Luke Clippinger Chair, House Members of the Judiciary Committee

FROM: Shanetha Lewis, Veterans Initiative 22, Executive Director

DATE: 03/04/2024

BILL: HB0296

POSITION: **Favorable**

Good Afternoon and thank you to Delegate Grammar for sponsoring this bill and to the chair Delegate Clippinger, as well as, to the members of the Judiciary Committee for allowing me the opportunity to express my organizations support of HB0296. My name is Shanetha Marable Lewis and I hold a Master's degree in Medical Cannabis Science and Therapeutics from UMD. I am a proud Army combat veteran, and I am also the Executive Director of Veterans Initiative 22 (VI22), a 501-C-3 non-profit organization whose mission is Veteran Suicide prevention.

Please note our organization's strong **support** for this bill. For the following reasons:

VI22 focus is on assisting Veterans, their Family and First Responders by providing resources, employment opportunities, and continuously advocating for their rights and unfettered access to affordable cannabis. One way in which we support our mission is by providing former service members free medical cannabis certifications through our partnering qualifying providers within the state of Maryland. Ironically, I cannot take advantage of the very service that I work daily towards providing for my fellow veterans. I personally do not have a medical cannabis card because I do not want to infringe upon my right to purchase, own, and possess a firearm and/or ammunition. Daily, when I speak to veterans about our organization and the services and programs that we provide, the very same reason that I have just given, is also the number one, most popular, or most quoted reason I am told that a veteran has decided NOT to get a medical cannabis card. In short they do not want to lose "their gun rights". Simply stated it is quite apparent that veterans don't want to and nor should they have to, choose between a viable and safe treatment for their health or the ability (and constitutional right) to protect themselves and their families. I find it quite a travesty that the very population our government spends millions meticulously training to be responsible marksmen are told after their sacrifice, that the medicine they are lawfully consuming to mitigate the symptoms from the injuries inflicted upon them during their service, ultimately makes them ineligible to own or even possess a firearm.

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A survey conducted by the American Legion in 2017 reported that 22% of the 16 million veterans in the US stated they are currently using cannabis to treat a medical condition. 40 percent of caregivers stated they know a veteran who is using medical cannabis to alleviate a condition. I am here today to advocate for our heroes at home, a unique and vulnerable population that overwhelmingly supports and uses medical cannabis and a community that is disproportionately effected by PTSD, Suicide, and other Mental Health concerns. It is apparent that many of our veterans are consuming cannabis, in some form or another, this bill would allow our veterans to seek solace from whatever ails them in medical cannabis without sacrificing their Second Amendment right.

Our esteemed Governor Wes Moore dedicated 2024 as the “Year of the military family”, well I can think of no better way to honor our veterans than by restoring their constitutional second amendment right, a right that was wrongfully stricken from them for their usage of a legal medication. A right that was taken based solely on old outdated science, sustained stigmas and just plain old reefer madness.

Again I thank you for your time in reading my testimony and for your consideration of my position. Cannabis is medicine and unrestricted affordable access to cannabis improves and saves lives!

We urge a **favorable** report on **HB0296**.

Respectfully,

Shanetha Lewis
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