

# VETERANS INITIATIVE 22

## Because We C.A.R.E

### Testimony on Maryland House Bill 1408:

TO: Delegate C. T. Wilson Chair, House Members of the Economics Matters Committee

FROM: Shanetha Lewis, Veterans Initiative 22, Executive Director

DATE: 02/21/2025

BILL: HB0525

POSITION: Favorable

Chair Delegate C. T. Wilson and esteemed members of the Economics matter committee,

First I want to say thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony in support of HB1408 My name is Shanetha Marable Lewis and I hold a Master's degree in Medical Cannabis Science and Therapeutics from the University of Maryland School of Pharmacy. I am a proud Army combat veteran, spouse of a 20 year retired Army combat veteran, and I am also the Executive Director of Veterans Initiative 22.

I am submitting this testimony on behalf of Veterans Initiative 22 in strong support of House Bill 1408, which seeks to protect the employment rights of fire and rescue public safety employees who are legally registered medical cannabis patients. Veterans Initiative 22 is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that focuses on helping Veterans, Family and First Responders by providing resources, opportunities, and continuously advocating for safe and affordable access to medical cannabis. VI 22 was named as such after the estimated 22 Veterans who commit suicide daily due to PTSD, and it is our organization's goal to bring national awareness to this tragedy, while also working to improve the lives of Veterans and First Responders across the country.

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

I am submitting this testimony on behalf of my organization and to advocate for our heroes at home, our esteemed and honorable first responders a population that overwhelmingly supports medical cannabis and a population that is disproportionately affected by PTSD, Chronic Pain,, and other health issues due to the physically demanding and dangerous and work they do to protect the lives and safety of Maryland citizens. As first responders, firefighters, EMTs, and paramedics routinely put their lives on the line to

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## Because We C.A.R.E

protect our communities. It is imperative that we recognize and accommodate their medical needs, including the therapeutic use of medical cannabis.

The mental and physical health burdens on first responders are well-documented. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), approximately **30% of first responders develop behavioral health conditions**, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression, compared to 20% in the general population. Firefighters, in particular, experience high levels of chronic pain, anxiety, and sleep disorders due to the strenuous and high-stress nature of their work.

Medical cannabis has emerged as an effective alternative to opioids and other pharmaceuticals for pain management, PTSD, and sleep disorders—three conditions prevalent among firefighters and emergency medical personnel. Studies indicate that states with medical cannabis programs have seen a **25% reduction in opioid overdose deaths**, emphasizing its potential as a safer pain management option.

Despite its legal status in Maryland, many first responders fear job-related repercussions for using medical cannabis under. The current lack of workplace protections forces them to choose between their well-being and their careers. HB 1408 ensures that our brave firefighters and emergency personnel are not unjustly penalized for making legal and medically sound healthcare decisions.

As studies have shown, employees who consume cannabis pose no greater risk to safety and discriminating against cannabis users due to positive urine analysis is an ineffective workplace safety policy. These tests do not determine whether an employee is inebriated or under the influence of cannabis at the given or current moment of collection but rather a reflection of past usage.

This bill does not promote on-duty impairment. It includes safeguards ensuring that fire and rescue employees remain fit for duty, prohibiting cannabis use within 12 hours of a shift. Instead, HB 1408 acknowledges the reality that many first responders require effective medical treatment without the fear of discrimination.

How are those who dedicate their lives to care for us in return being cared for properly if they must choose between their economic health and their mental and or biological health? By passing HB 1408, Maryland will take a critical step toward supporting the health and rights of those who dedicate their lives to protecting ours. I urge the committee to vote in favor of this bill. h.

# **VETERANS** **INITIATIVE** 22

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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 **HB1408**.

Thank You,

Shanetha Lewis  
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