

HB0283 — 2/4/20 - testimony from L. J. Zwick, Catonsville MD

Thank you for allowing me to speak.

My name is Lawrence Zwick. I retired from the Coast Guard as a Chief Warrant Officer in 2007. Knowing full well my wife would not allow me to sit at home and play video games, I opened a head shop in Catonsville Maryland. Today, I have two head shops, one in Catonsville and the other in Crofton. A few years ago, I started getting calls for Kratom. I decided to carry the natural herb. Last year I sold \$339,000.00 worth of Kratom and I'm not alone. There are 5 stores within 2 miles of my Catonsville business selling the same product, Kratom. Since October 1st, I have not sold any Kratom to anyone under 21. I don't let anyone under 21 in my shop. I'm a "tobacco store". And the truth is, most of my Kratom customers are well over 30 years old.

In my stores, several days a week, I'm the person behind the counter. I interact with my customers, especially the veterans. I love talking to other vets. I would say that close to 20 percent of my Kratom business is to vets of all ages with all kinds of disabilities. There is young guy, he is in his 30's. He came back from Afghanistan. I see him a few times a month. He showed me his scar that goes from the top of his neck all the way down to his belt line. He told me the VA will hand him pain medications like it's candy. He wants a more natural solution to his pain. He uses Kratom.

I have experienced pain. I spent the last year of my military service in and out of Walter Reed Hospital receiving non-surgical treatment for two cracked bones in my neck. Six months after retirement, one and a half years after my right arm went numb and I had shooting pains up and down my spine, civilian surgeons fixed my neck and stopped my pain. The surgery was so successful, I was able to throw away the 75 remaining pain pills I had left. Those 75 pain pills are worth \$5.00 each on the street. I threw them away. I know these VA hospitals and even civilian doctors will hand you pain pills like candy. I didn't know about Kratom at the time I was in pain, but I have used Kratom occasionally. I'm convinced Kratom is a way out of that pill mill system.

As I said, I've experienced pain but I've never experienced the withdrawal symptoms caused by Heroin. I know for a fact, a very large number of Kratom customers are those who are suffering from the withdrawal symptoms of Heroin. They are not simply trading one addiction for another. I talk to these people. I see them face to face and I ask "why are you using Kratom?". They are looking to get clean. Looking for a natural way to get better. Based on my conversations with people addicted to heroin, I think it's safe to say the withdrawal symptoms from Kratom are much easier to deal with.

I believe if you take Kratom off the shelf, the Heroin user will go back to heroin, it's cheaper and just as easy to find.

I'm asking you to put this bill on hold. Please do more research before you take a good part of my paycheck away... Not to mention those thousands of people across this state who rely on Kratom to get thru the pain and suffering of each day. Kratom is not being abused. It's being used.

Thank you for your time.

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