

VETERANS INITIATIVE 22

Because We C.A.R.E

Testimony on Maryland Senate Bill 925:

TO: Chair Senator Guy Guzzone, Senate Budget and Taxation Committee

FROM: Shanetha Lewis, Veterans Initiative 22, Executive Director

DATE: 03/02/2026

BILL: SB0925

POSITION: Favorable with Amendments

Chair Senator Guzzone and esteemed members of the Budget and Taxation committee,

First I want to say thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony in support of SB0925. My name is Shanetha Marable-Lewis. I am a proud Army combat veteran, and the Executive Director of Veterans Initiative 22, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that focuses on preventing Veteran Suicide through helping Veterans, Family and First Responders by providing resources, opportunities, and continuously advocating for safe and affordable access to medical cannabis. VI22 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.

I am submitting this testimony on behalf of Veterans Initiative 22 in strong support of Senate Bill 0925, which would direct a portion of cannabis sales tax revenue to the Maryland Veterans Trust Fund. However, I respectfully urge this committee to amend the bill to increase the allocation from 3% to 5% of cannabis sales tax revenue.

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

THE CRISIS WE FACE

Every day, 22 veterans and active duty service members die by suicide in America. This statistic is not just a number—it represents fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, and community members who served our nation and deserved better care when they returned home. In Maryland alone, we lose approximately 150 veterans to suicide annually, a tragedy compounded by the reality that many of these deaths are **preventable** with proper access to evidence-based treatments and support services.

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THE INTERSECTION OF CANNABIS AND VETERAN HEALTH

Here at VI22 we have witnessed firsthand the transformative impact of medical cannabis on veteran health outcomes. The evidence is compelling:

- Veterans use cannabis to manage service-connected conditions including PTSD, traumatic brain injury, chronic pain, and moral injury
- Cannabis has shown promise in reducing opioid dependence and overdose deaths among veterans
- Peer-reviewed research increasingly supports cannabis as a therapeutic option for conditions disproportionately affecting the veteran population
- Access barriers—**including cost**—prevent many veterans from obtaining this potentially life-saving medicine

WHY THIS BILL MATTERS

Senate Bill 925 acknowledges a fundamental truth: the legal cannabis industry in Maryland exists in part because of the advocacy, research, and lived experiences of veterans like myself and the thousands we serve through VI22. Veterans have been at the forefront of cannabis reform, testifying before legislators, participating in clinical research, and building community support for safe access.

It is both appropriate and just that veterans benefit directly from the tax revenue generated by an industry they helped legitimize.

WHY 5% IS THE RIGHT NUMBER

While we appreciate Senator Harris's leadership in filing this legislation at 3%, Veterans Initiative 22 respectfully requests an amendment to increase the allocation to 5% for the following reasons:

1. **PROPORTIONATE IMPACT:**

Veterans represent approximately 6% of Maryland's population but throughout the US account for disproportionately high rates of medical cannabis patients seeking treatment for service-connected conditions. A 5% allocation more accurately reflects veteran utilization and need.

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2. CRITICAL SERVICES FUNDING:

The Maryland Veterans Trust Fund supports essential programs that directly address veteran suicide prevention, mental health services, family support, and crisis intervention. Current funding levels cannot meet the demonstrated need. An additional 2% would generate substantial resources for evidence-based interventions.

3. FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY:

Under current law, 22% of cannabis sales tax revenue goes directly to the General Fund. Increasing the veterans allocation to 5% would reduce this to 20%—a modest adjustment that maintains substantial general revenue while prioritizing those who served.

4. NATIONAL RECOGNITION:

Maryland has an opportunity to lead again by establishing the most robust state-level cannabis tax allocation for veteran services in the nation.

5. ECONOMIC JUSTICE:

Many veterans live on fixed incomes and struggle to afford medical cannabis despite its therapeutic benefits. Due to the current Schedule I status, regardless of recent Executive Orders, the VHA does not provide any repayment and/or compensation for medical cannabis products or the state mandated certifying provider appointment to obtain a medical cannabis card, the Enhanced Trust Fund resources would enable grant programs to subsidize access for these low-income veterans, reducing this substantial financial barrier to care.

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PROPOSED AMENDMENT

We respectfully request the following amendment to SB0925:

On page 4, line 6, strike "3%" and insert "5%"

On page 4, line 8, strike "22%" and insert "20%"

This amendment would:

- Increase Maryland Veterans Trust Fund allocation to 5% of cannabis sales tax revenue
- Maintain 75% allocation to Cannabis Regulation and Enforcement, Social Equity, Community Reinvestment, counties, public health, and business assistance programs
- Reduce General Fund allocation from 22% to 20%

CONCLUSION

Senate Bill 925 represents a meaningful commitment to Maryland's veterans—a recognition that those who sacrificed for our freedoms deserve support when they return home. The connection between cannabis policy and veteran wellness is not theoretical; it is documented in peer-reviewed research, clinical outcomes, and the lived experiences of thousands of Maryland veterans.

By amending this bill to allocate 5% of cannabis sales tax revenue to the Maryland Veterans Trust Fund, this committee has the opportunity to:

- Strengthen suicide prevention infrastructure
- Reduce barriers to evidence-based treatments
- Honor the advocacy work veterans have contributed to cannabis reform
- Establish Maryland as a national leader in veteran-centered cannabis policy
- Save lives

Our veterans deserve more than our gratitude—they deserve our investment. They deserve access to the treatments that work. They deserve a system that prioritizes their health and well-being with the same dedication they showed in their service.

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I urge you to vote favorably on Senate Bill 925 with the proposed amendment to increase the allocation to 5%.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome any questions.

Respectfully,

Shanetha Marable-Lewis, MS MCST
Veterans Initiative 22
Executive Director
304-322-6384
info@veteransinitiative22.com