

VETERANS INITIATIVE 22

Because We C.A.R.E

Testimony on Maryland House Bill 797:

TO: Delegate Kriselda Valderrama Chair, Members of the House Economics Matters Committee

FROM: Shanetha Lewis, Veterans Initiative 22, Executive Director

DATE: 03/09/2026

BILL: HB0797

POSITION: Favorable

Chair Delegate Valderrama and esteemed members of the House Economics Matters Committee,

First, I want to thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of SB0439. 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 the Executive Director of Veterans Initiative 22.

I am submitting this testimony on behalf of Veterans Initiative 22 in strong support of House Bill 0797, 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, Families, and First Responders by providing resources, opportunities, and continuously advocating for safe and affordable access to medical cannabis. VI22 was named after the estimated 22 Veterans who die by suicide daily due to PTSD, and it is our organization's mission to bring national awareness to this tragedy while improving the lives of Veterans and First Responders across the country.

Please note our strong support for this bill, for the following reasons:

First responders — firefighters, EMTs, and paramedics — routinely put their lives on the line to protect our communities. They represent a population that overwhelmingly supports medical cannabis and one that is disproportionately affected by PTSD, chronic pain, and other health conditions arising from the physically demanding and dangerous nature of their work. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), approximately 30% of first responders develop behavioral health conditions — including 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, high-stress environment they navigate daily.

The urgency and relevance of HB0797 has been made even more evident by recent developments here in Maryland. In December 2025, Howard County Executive Calvin Ball

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announced a landmark policy update for the Howard County Department of Fire and Rescue Services, reached in agreement with the Howard County International Association of Firefighters (IAFF) Local 2000 — the first such policy update since 1991. Effective January 31, 2026, Howard County uniformed firefighters are now permitted to use medical cannabis while off-duty, provided use does not occur within 12 hours of a shift and a valid medical cannabis authorization is on file with Human Resources. As County Executive Ball stated, “This policy reinforces our commitment to supporting our members,” who face elevated risks for cancer, heart and lung disease, PTSD, and sleep disorders. (Source: CBS Baltimore / WJZ, December 19, 2025)

The Howard County firefighters’ union had been advocating for this change for over two years. Their persistence paid off, and it sets a precedent for what this legislation now seeks to codify statewide. HB0797 would ensure that what Howard County has voluntarily extended to its firefighters becomes a protected right for all fire and rescue public safety employees across Maryland — regardless of the county or jurisdiction in which they serve.

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. Research indicates that states with medical cannabis programs have seen significant reductions in opioid overdose deaths, underscoring cannabis’s potential as a safer pain management option. Despite its legal status in Maryland, many first responders fear job-related repercussions for using medical cannabis off-duty. The current lack of statewide workplace protections forces them to choose between their well-being and their careers. SB0439 would ensure our brave firefighters and emergency personnel are not unjustly penalized for making legal and medically sound healthcare decisions.

It is also critical to address the limitations of current drug testing methodologies. Standard urine analysis does not determine whether an employee is impaired or under the influence of cannabis at the moment of testing; it reflects only past use. Discriminating against cannabis patients on the basis of such tests is an ineffective workplace safety policy. This bill does not promote on-duty impairment — it includes clear safeguards, prohibiting cannabis use within 12 hours of a shift, consistent with the approach already adopted in Howard County. SB0439 simply acknowledges the reality that first responders deserve access to effective, legal medical treatment without fear of discrimination.

The need for this legislation is not abstract to our organization. A member of Veterans Initiative 22’s own Board of Directors — a veteran who uses THC as a state-legally authorized, medically recommended medicine — was denied a volunteer fire and rescue position solely because of that legal, prescribed use. This individual was willing to serve their community, possessed the training and dedication to do so, and was turned away not because of any impairment, not because of any safety concern, but because of a positive result on a test that cannot even

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measure current intoxication. This is the human cost of the policy gap that this bill seeks to close.

Maryland is not alone in wrestling with this issue. Across the United States, states and municipalities have increasingly recognized that blanket cannabis bans for first responders are out of step with both the science and the law. Numerous jurisdictions have implemented or are actively pursuing protections similar to what HB0797 proposes. Following the federal reclassification of cannabis from Schedule I to Schedule III in December 2025, the momentum toward fair and rational cannabis workplace policy has only accelerated. Maryland has an opportunity to be a leader in ensuring first responder health protections keep pace with both state law and evolving federal policy.

How are those who dedicate their lives to care for us being properly cared for in return, if they must choose between their economic security and their mental or physical health? By passing this bill, 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 favorably on this bill.

Again, I thank you for your time in reading this 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 HB0797.

Thank You,

Shanetha Lewis

Veterans Initiative 22

Executive Director

304-322-6384

info@veteransinitiative22.com