

Public Comment in Opposition to Senate Bill 820

Submitted by: RJ Jackson | Entrepreneur, Social Media Influencer, Stand-Up Comedian

Good afternoon. My name is RJ Jackson. I am an entrepreneur, social media influencer, stand-up comedian, and a lifelong Maryland resident. If it were not for kratom, I would not be any of those things today.

Since the OxyContin epidemic swept through America during my high school years, I was a regular user of opioids. I lied to my friends, my family, and my employers, while holding myself back from every dream I had because of my addiction. For years, I desperately wanted to get clean, but the paths I watched my friends take looked nearly as bleak. A life dependent on Suboxone, methadone, or other powerful pharmaceuticals was not the life I had envisioned for myself. So I tried quitting cold turkey — many, many times. Sometimes I would do well for a few weeks or even months, but one moment of temptation would set me back another three to four years.

Then in 2016, just as the country was debating whether to ban kratom entirely, I decided to try it. If I had not, I believe I would be like many of my friends who are no longer here. Kratom got me clean — right as fentanyl was taking people I loved, one after another. I never touched another drug again. Overnight. Within a few weeks, I decided to try coming off kratom as well, because I did not want to be dependent on anything. I did — cold turkey — and the most I suffered was the sniffles for 48 hours. For millions of people across this country, this plant has been nothing short of a lifeline.

Today, I still use kratom, it's just no longer a daily thing for me. Some weeks I do not use it at all. I now use it for focus, creativity, as a pre-workout supplement, and occasionally as a social lubricant. I am living the life I once only dreamed of — not because a pharmaceutical company gave me a lifetime prescription, but because a plant that has been used safely for thousands of years gave me a second chance.

Senate Bill 820 would grant the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Cannabis Commission sweeping authority to seize, confiscate, and destroy so-called "unauthorized consumable products" and prohibit retailers from selling or advertising them. Under the existing Maryland law, a product qualifies as unauthorized if it has not been recognized as a dietary ingredient or approved drug by the FDA. Kratom has not received that recognition — and critically, neither have thousands of other natural supplements that millions of Americans use every single day without controversy. Turmeric root, passionflower, chamomile, valerian root — none of these have FDA approval either. No one is moving to ban them. The standard being selectively applied to kratom here is not being applied evenly, and that inconsistency deserves serious scrutiny from this committee. If FDA approval is truly the bar, then this bill has implications far beyond kratom alone.

Make no mistake: while this may not be an explicit ban written in plain language, the practical effect is identical — Maryland residents will no longer be able to access kratom. And the consequences of that will be severe. People will return to drugs — as many individuals battling addiction simply do not have access to the tools or support systems that helped me find my way out. Whether that means prescription opioids or illicit substances, the result will be the same. They could potentially become criminals overnight because of yet another prohibition campaign against a natural remedy with a documented history of helping people. For many struggling with addiction, kratom is not a luxury. It is the only off-ramp they have found from a highway of destruction.

I urge you to consider the over 17,000 Marylanders who have died from drug overdoses since the year I got clean in 2016. Some of them were my friends. Some were parents. All of them were someone's child. Every single one was a tragedy. Please do not close the door on the tool that saved my life — and that continues to save lives across this state every single day.

Thank you,
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