

# VETERAN'S ADMINISTRATION ACCEPTS CANNABIS FOR VETS

## VHA DIRECTIVE 2011-004

*"...patients participating in State marijuana programs must not be denied VHA services."*

In 1996, California passed the first modern medical cannabis access law; however, it wasn't until 2010 that the Veterans Health Administration bowed to pressure from veterans to pass a VA medical cannabis directive.

Squeezed between a long history of cannabis research at VA hospitals, including modern double-blind studies under the CMCR, and the political pressure from the DEA, the Veterans Health Administration has carved out some space for veterans who are legally using cannabis under doctor's supervision per a state-level access law.

According to Dr. Petzel, the VA Undersecretary for Health, "Standard pain management agreements should draw a clear distinction between the use of illegal drugs and legal medical marijuana."

Now on its second revision, the national VA medical cannabis policy has served veterans living in medical cannabis-friendly states very well.

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100kStrong.net is a project of the Florida Cannabis Action Network, in cooperation with NORML of FL Veterans Committee and Veterans for

## Cannabis: What Legal Access Means to Veterans

**Michael Krawitz - E-4,  
United States Air Force**

As a national advocate for veterans, in a nut shell, legal access means more choices for the patient and better outcomes from their treatment.

**Joe Sisco - E-4,  
United States Marine Corps**

Access to this natural medicine would mean not taking eight pills a day to control my daily seizures. It would also allow me to return to work after two years of health-related retirement.

**Edwin Davidson - PFC,  
United States Army**

I am a disabled veteran with a disability 100% service-connected. I take methadone for pain which is physically addictive and responsible for one third of all deaths from painkillers. Right now it is a necessary evil. Legalization of cannabis would give me a non-physically addictive option that may also save my life.

**Juan Carlos Palenzuela - E-4,  
United States Army**

For me, access to cannabis would mean I no longer need to stand by and watch my wife suffer with crones disease, while ingesting pills that do not cure, but do have horrible side effects. It would also give me an alternative for treating my Hep-C condition, which traditional meds do not cure.

**John Hanbery - Operations  
Specialist CIC, United States Navy**

When a motorist hit me while bicycling, life as I knew it was over. Two brain bleeds, time in a coma and a long recovery has left me with symptoms I can't control and PTSD from the incident. Cannabis may help me to pursue a normal life. Of course, in Florida I am not allowed to try and I really don't want to be a

# Cannabis & VETERANS

*You earned the*

# FREEDOM TO CHOOSE!

**How will you treat  
PTSD**

**TBI**

**Phantom Limb Pain**

**Pain Management**

**& Others?**

Veterans in states where  
cannabis is legal can access  
cannabis without fear of losing  
VA services



## CANNABIS: GOOD FOR WHAT AILS YOU

### PTSD

Post-traumatic stress is an important health condition estimated to occur in 3-6% of Service Members with no deployment experience and up to 25% of Service Members who have been deployed to combat zones. Combat frequency and intensity is the strongest predictor of the condition. Although PTSD is not associated with a physical injury, the damage caused by the trauma is now better understood because of research into the human body's own endocannabinoid system, a regulatory system found in the human body, similar to that of the body's nervous or respiratory system. This research in the endogenous cannabinoid receptor system shows us that those suffering from this medical condition may have a deficit of cannabinoids in their system.

### TBI

Traumatic Brain Injury is another issue faced by many of our veterans. In the injured brain, cannabinoids, chemical compounds found in cannabis, are believed to reduce levels of glutamate, a toxic molecule released after injury. Cannabinoids decrease the amount of free radicals and TNF (a chemical that causes inflammation) after injury, and increases the blood supply to the brain. All these mechanisms are essential for limiting the damage done after the primary injury. Despite leaving cannabis listed as a Schedule I substance, the federal government recognized years ago cannabinoids' role as "neuroprotectants, for example in limiting neurological damage following ischemic insults, such as stroke and trauma," and, furthermore, the Department of Health and Human Services took out a patent to capitalize on this property of cannabis in 2003.

## PHANTOM LIMB PAINS

Little is known about the true mechanism causing phantom pain. Patients who suffer amputation of an extremity can experience a type of referred neuropathic pain in the amputated zone. Pharmacologic management of this condition is complex, and it is based mainly on anticonvulsants, with side effects including poor balance, nausea, slurred speech, and skin rashes. The use of cannabinoids is supported by their efficacy in alleviating neuropathic pain. Promising results have been obtained in clinical practice with the use of cannabis.

## CHRONIC PAIN MANAGEMENT

Many veterans suffer from painful injuries and conditions that don't ever go away, these are considered chronic pain. Chronic pain seriously interferes with the quality of life for many patients, and ushers in depression, addiction or substance misuse. A typical observation by patients is that their use of cannabis doesn't necessarily take away the pain, but that they are no longer preoccupied with the pain; they are able to live with it largely unnoticed. In cases of inflammatory pain, cannabis decreases the inflammation that causes the pain. Many chronic pain patients have been prescribed strong opioids, such as oxycodone, morphine, or hydrocodone to manage their pain. However, with the use of cannabis, most patients significantly decrease or even eliminate their use of these opioids.

## VETS SHARE SIMILAR CONCERNS ABOUT CANNABIS

### •FEAR OF LOSING BENEFITS-

As a member of the armed services, you earned your benefits. Incarceration for over 60 days on a felony conviction will result in temporary reductions of your financial benefits. The current VA policy assures veterans in cannabis-friendly states will have no reduction in treatments, services or benefits.

### •FEAR OF GOVERNMENT SCRUTINY-

We swore to defend the Constitution of the United States and we successfully defended our Right to exercise the First Amendment. Everyone is afraid of being on someone's list; however, Fox News reported in May 2013 that 85% of likely voters throughout the country are in favor of medical cannabis. Most likely you and your neighbors are on the same side of this issue.

### •FRIENDS AND FAMILY WON'T UNDERSTAND-

Until you have lived with a chronic condition or cared for someone with a terminal disease, you can't understand. Rest assured, if you find relief using cannabis, the people who truly love you will be happy to see you recover and increase your quality of life.

### •RELATIONSHIPS WILL BE IN JEOPARDY-

If the medicine is effective for you, you stand a good chance of improving your relationships. What puts relationships in jeopardy is the status of cannabis as illegal.

### •PEOPLE WILL THINK YOU'RE A POT HEAD-

Cannabis-based products, like lozenges and tinctures, are available through licensed dispensaries in cannabis-friendly states. Every human, in fact every vertebrate, has an endocannabinoid system, if the system isn't functioning properly or is damaged, your health depends on supplementing the naturally occurring cannabinoids. For sick people, this is a health issue, not a social statement.

Veterans CAN Help Change Cannabis Laws



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