



VETERANS CANNABIS COALITION  
[www.veteranscannacoalition.org](http://www.veteranscannacoalition.org)

July 30, 2020

The Honorable Jerrold Nadler  
Chairman  
House Committee on the Judiciary  
2138 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Nadler,

The Veterans Cannabis Coalition—an independent, self-funded group of veterans advocating for the end of federal cannabis prohibition and the research and development of cannabis-based treatments in the Department of Veterans Affairs—would like to commend the Chair and committee on its leadership in cannabis reform and to endorse the Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement (MORE) Act of 2019.

Veterans exist in all communities—we occupy every conceivable demographic and cross-section in American society. Our collective lived experience spans four generations, from a time when the entire nation mobilized for a war against fascism, to a small all-volunteer force fighting the longest wars in U.S. history. It is impossible to try to generalize on the qualities of 19 million people whose common characteristic is wearing the uniform of this nation, but that experience often proves life-altering.

For millions of our fellow sisters- and brothers-in-arms, military service has meant sacrifice. Although so many are proud of the work we did and cannot deny the benefits that come after service, no one would deny it comes at a cost. Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, for more than 100,000 members of our community, the price was an early death by suicide or overdose.

Since Department of Veterans Affairs began collecting suicide data in 2005, we have watched billions of dollars and years of effort spent on commissions, reports, and a slew of interventions meant to stem the unrelenting tide of early deaths in our community. Yet, veteran suicide has remained steady at an average of more than 6,000 deaths a year for the last 13 of 20 years where data exists.

One glaring omission in all the discussion of veteran suicide and overdose, amazingly, has been the role that legally prescribed pharmaceuticals play in driving those outcomes. Time and again, we have seen firsthand how the Department of Veterans Affairs and private health care push cocktails of toxic and addictive medications on veteran patients without informed consent, without a plan, and without evidence. Drugs like antidepressants, anti-psychotics, stimulants, sedatives, and opioids are given in combinations, durations, and dosages not backed by existing research.

Veterans often deal with complex and overlapping physical and mental conditions, including traumatic brain injury (TBI), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), chronic pain, depression, and anxiety. The nature of healthcare provision in this country often boils down to being prescribed pharmaceuticals for narrow, specific indications. But when an individual patient, like a combat-wounded veteran, presents a range of symptoms they are given a regimen of pills to consume. After taking multiple drugs for extended periods, many with explicit warnings of side-effects including suicidal thought, these veterans experience profound degradation of their health and quality of life.

We have heard, time and again, how not only did these “combat cocktails” of pills not work, but they created dangerous issues of their own. Not being able to sleep, to eat, to think clearly, to speak, to enjoy the basic pleasures of life, all the while being treated by professionals who claim to have to your best interest at heart is a special kind of hell. That hell is one that untold numbers of veterans exist in because the federal government refuses to acknowledge the medicinal qualities of the cannabis plant and enforces a violent and destructive national prohibition.

Faced with a veteran telling you that smoking dried plant matter helped them more than the array of legal drugs or other therapies thrown at them, knowing how many have struggled with and ultimately succumbed to their wounds, weighed down by pharmaceuticals—what is there to say?

While we focus on the immediate healthcare needs cannabis may be able to address, the truth is that cannabis prohibition in particular, and our drug control laws in general, are rooted in racism and pseudoscience and sustained by greed and the desire for control. Veterans live and participate in a society marked by systemic and institutional racism, and some been discriminated against continuously through their lives because of the color of their skin or perceived ethnicity. Their honorable service has never been enough to shield them from the prevailing attitudes about equality, and there is a long and shameful history of Black, Native American, and veterans of color being denied their benefits through administrative corruption or targeted by law enforcement. The presence of cannabis has been used as a cudgel and a means to strip them of life and liberty just as it has millions of Americans across more than eight decades.

The fight for legalization and the investigation of the medical benefits of cannabis promises to strike at a number of social ills: expanding beneficial treatment options to so many in need of alternatives, eliminating a major driver in mass incarceration, and jumpstarting a new economic sector are just a few of many. The MORE Act offers the entire United States the opportunity to recognize the damage done the people of this nation in criminalizing basic self-agency and correct course. We will continue to work to see that veterans serve as advocates and messengers on these issues and are ready to assist in anyway we can.

Sincerely,

Eric Goepel  
U.S. Army, 2004-2011  
Founder, Veterans Cannabis Coalition

Bill Ferguson  
U.S. Army, 2002-2005  
Co-Founder, Veterans Cannabis Coalition