Public Hearing for SB 16 – Testimony by Steve Kennedy, IAVA-CT

Written Testimony Concerning SB 16: An Act Concerning the Adult Use of Cannabis

Distinguished members of the Committee on the Judiciary, my name is Steve Kennedy. I am an Iraq war veteran and the leader of IAVA-CT, which is the Connecticut chapter of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA). I write today concerning S.B. 16, An Act Concerning the Adult Use of Cannabis.

Like a majority of veterans across the country, I support efforts to legalize cannabis for adults in Connecticut. Cannabis access is a veterans’ issue, and I thank the Committee for recognizing it as such. IAVA-CT believes that full legalization of cannabis is the best way to ensure that those who need palliative marijuana can access it, and to prevent cannabis users’ unnecessary contact with the criminal justice system. With proper attention to the equitable allocation of business permits, legal cannabis also creates new economic opportunities for veterans and other Connecticut residents. IAVA-CT also supports efforts to increase access to the existing medical marijuana program, which should remain a tax-free, affordable alternative to legal recreational cannabis.

Connecticut veterans face numerous barriers to accessing medical marijuana. Even though cannabis has been shown to have therapeutic value for a significant number of service-connected conditions like chronic pain and PTSD,¹ federal Department of Veterans Affairs physicians are prohibited from prescribing medical marijuana. In fact, physicians at the VA are barred from even discussing the potential benefits of medical cannabis with their veteran.

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patients. From a public health perspective, this policy is disastrous. Instead of prescribing cannabis, VA doctors frequently turn to opioid prescriptions for pain management. Moreover, veterans without prescription access to palliative cannabis are likelier to self-medicate with riskier substances like alcohol or illegal opioids.²

Connecticut’s existing cannabis policies frequently make matters worse for veterans. When a veteran who relies on VA care wants to access medical marijuana, the veteran must first go outside the VA system and find a new doctor who can certify the veteran for Connecticut’s medical marijuana program, paying that doctor out of pocket. The veteran then must register with the state and pay Connecticut’s $100 registration fee. Under Connecticut’s current rules, these costs repeat year after year. It is simply unacceptable that low-income veterans must pay hundreds of dollars per year in additional administrative fees — all before even purchasing the drug itself.

These barriers to access mean that Connecticut veterans suffering from chronic pain, PTSD and other conditions may cross state lines into Massachusetts, where recreational cannabis is legal, in order to buy enough to serve their medical needs until they have the time and money to make another trip. Or, veterans may seek out illegal cannabis on the street, which exposes them to both criminal penalties and to cannabis that may have been tampered with. Despite the decriminalization of small amounts of cannabis in Connecticut, estimates suggest that more than 100 Connecticut veterans are arrested each year for cannabis-related violations. Veterans with criminal records are far likelier to experience unemployment and homelessness.

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Connecticut should join other states in recognizing that full legalization is the best way to ensure access to cannabis for veterans and others with palliative needs. Full legalization is also the only way to prevent unnecessary contacts with the criminal justice system.

Yet another reason to support legalization is that it will create economic opportunities in the newly legal retail cannabis industry, and it is important to ensure that these opportunities are shared equitably. IAVA-CT therefore joins other advocates in supporting the equity provisions in S.B. 16, which would ensure that individuals with cannabis-related convictions and individuals from communities that have been disproportionately affected by the enforcement of cannabis criminalization are provided an equal opportunity to participate in the cannabis industry.

Like individuals with criminal convictions for possession, less-than-Honorably discharged veterans are often among those who have suffered most from the harmful effects of existing federal and state marijuana laws. Veterans are frequently discharged from military service with less-than-Honorable statuses as a result of cannabis-related misconduct. These veterans have greater difficulty obtaining jobs after returning home. And service members of color are up to two times more likely than their white peers to receive less-than-honorable discharges. In order to address this disparity, the Committee should consider extending “equity applicant status” to less-than-Honorably discharged veterans who can demonstrate, via affidavit or other documentation, that their military discharge was related to the possession of cannabis.

Finally, for the purposes of any veteran-related provisions of retail marijuana legislation, the General Assembly should include within the definition of veteran individuals with a qualifying condition who were released from the military with other-than-Honorable discharges. This would be in keeping with the framework established in Public Law 18-47, which unanimously passed the General Assembly in 2018, and which extended state benefits to
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veterans with other-than-Honorable discharges and a qualifying condition of PTSD, military sexual trauma, or traumatic brain injury.

Connecticut has been a leader among the states in ensuring that all of its veterans are taken care of. Just two years ago, members of this Committee helped secure unanimous passage of a bill to extend state benefits to Connecticut veterans with PTSD, traumatic brain injuries, and experiences of military sexual trauma. We cannot fall behind in ensuring that veterans are not unnecessarily precluded from needed medical treatment or criminalized for self medicating. We cannot afford to wait on full cannabis legalization. On behalf of the members of IAVA-CT, I thank the Committee for their attention to this issue.