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JUSTICE

Senate Committee Passes Bill Allowing Doctors To Recommend Medical Marijuana To Veterans

BY [CARIMAH TOWNES](#) POSTED ON MAY 21, 2015 AT 4:57 PM

CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK

The Senate Appropriations Committee just voted in favor of the Veterans Equal Access Amendment, which would legally authorize the Veterans Administration (VA) to recommend medical marijuana to people who served in the military.

The bipartisan amendment, co-sponsored by Sens. Steve Daines (R-MT) and Jeff Merkley (D-OR), would allow the VA to discuss medical marijuana treatment options in states where medical marijuana is legal. But it's just one portion of the Compassionate Access, Research Expansion and Respect States (CARERS) Act introduced last March, which would legalize medical marijuana across the country. It also follows the introduction of the Veterans Equal Access Act in the House of

Representatives earlier this year, which would also grant VA healthcare providers the ability to recommend marijuana use for medicinal purposes.

For veterans dealing with mental health and physical ailments, the opportunity to learn about marijuana treatment would be a game changer. For instance, roughly 60 percent of surveyed IAVA members who served in the Army, Navy, Marines, or Air Force suffer from PTSD and other brain trauma. While research about the impact of medical marijuana on mental health is almost non-existent, many believe pot can reduce certain PTSD symptoms, including anxiety and flashbacks. Neuroscientists also believe cannabis can assist with depression, an illness that hundreds of thousands of veterans have. Medical marijuana is effectively used to mitigate chronic pain, and states that permit pot consumption for health purposes found drops in the number of painkiller-related overdoses. Indeed, most doctors acknowledge that marijuana is of medical value — and would prescribe it to their patients as needed, but VA physicians are prevented from exploring marijuana treatment with patients.

To date, D.C. and 23 other states have legalized medical cannabis. Although the Senate committee vote marks an advance in marijuana approval, the federal government still classifies cannabis as a Schedule I drug with no medical benefits. As a result, feds cannot fund medical marijuana studies, and are prevented from legally endorsing medical marijuana's use in the healthcare system.

“Veterans in medical marijuana states should be treated the same as any other resident, and should be able to discuss marijuana with their doctor and use it if it's medically necessary,” Policy Manager for the Drug Policy Alliance Michael Collins said in a press release. “They have served this country valiantly, so the least we can do is allow them to have full and open discussions with their doctors.”

Past surveys of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) members concluded 70 percent of respondents believes Congress has not adequately addressed veterans' needs overall. Still, the push to legalize pot is gaining traction among Republicans and Democrats alike. For instance, Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) supports the decriminalization of marijuana and Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV) believes the feds should be more open to medical marijuana research. Moreover, the majority of Americans say pot should be legalized, and most voters in three major swing states are pro-pot, which means presidential hopefuls may need to come out in favor of marijuana to win the next election.

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