

Committee Pushes VA to Explore Cannabis as Opioid Alternative

Senate Committee Urges VA to Explore Medical Marijuana as Opioid Alternative for Veterans

In a significant move, a Senate committee is urging the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to explore the use of medical marijuana as an alternative to opioids for veterans. This push comes amidst the Biden administration's efforts to reschedule cannabis. Additionally, the committee is asking the VA to consider allowing its doctors to formally recommend cannabis to patients in states where it is legal.

Senate Appropriations Committee's Directives

In a series of reports attached to spending bills that moved through the Senate Appropriations Committee, lawmakers addressed various aspects of marijuana, psychedelics, and hemp. Among these, the Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies (MilConVA) spending bill included a directive for the VA to study medical marijuana as a potential opioid alternative and report its findings within one year.

Reducing Opioid Use Through Medical Cannabis

The committee's report specifically encourages the VA to study the relationship between state-approved medical marijuana programs and the reduction of opioid use and abuse among veterans. The findings of this study are to be provided to the Committees on Appropriations of both Houses of Congress within one year of the act's enactment.

Potential Rescheduling and VA Doctors' Recommendations

The report also addresses the possibility of rescheduling marijuana from Schedule I to Schedule III under the Controlled Substances Act (CSA), as proposed by the Justice Department. Should this rescheduling occur, the VA is urged to consider allowing its doctors to recommend medical cannabis to veterans living in states with legal medical marijuana programs.

VA Policy on GI Bill Benefits

Another significant aspect of the report addresses a VA policy from 2022 that restricts veterans from using GI Bill benefits for educational courses aimed at preparing them for the cannabis industry. The committee has directed the VA to submit a report to Congress within 90 days of the legislation's enactment, detailing the number of veterans affected by this policy.

Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy for Veterans

The Senate committee also highlighted the therapeutic potential of psychedelics for treating mental health conditions such as PTSD and major depressive disorder. The VA secretary is required to provide a report on the status of studies exploring these therapies within 180 days of the legislation's enactment. Additionally, the VA is directed to initiate a longitudinal study tracking the outcomes of veterans participating in psychedelic-assisted therapies over five years.

Agriculture and Hemp Research

The appropriations legislation covering Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration (Ag/FDA) also touches on the potential of psychedelics and hemp. The committee encourages the FDA to work with the VA and other agencies to study the medical potential of substances like MDMA, psilocybin, and ibogaine. The USDA is urged to conduct research to facilitate hemp cultivar development and maintain a hemp germplasm repository.

Access to Loans for Hemp Producers

The report directs the Farm Credit Administration to work with institutions under its jurisdiction to provide access to guaranteed loans for hemp producers and businesses. This directive is part of a broader recognition of the growing market potential for U.S. hemp and hemp-based products.

House Committee's Stance

Meanwhile, the House Rules Committee recently rejected several marijuana-related amendments to spending bills, including proposals to ban certain federal agencies from testing job applicants for cannabis and prevent border patrol agents from seizing marijuana from state-licensed businesses. Additionally, the Appropriations Committee passed another spending bill that removed provisions safeguarding banks that work with state-licensed cannabis businesses and reattached a section blocking Washington, D.C. from legalizing marijuana sales.

The Senate Appropriations Committee's push for the VA to explore medical marijuana as an alternative to opioids marks a significant step in addressing the needs of veterans. By potentially allowing VA doctors to recommend cannabis and reconsidering restrictive policies, the committee aims to provide veterans with safer and more effective treatment options. As the conversation around cannabis and its medical applications evolves, these legislative efforts reflect a growing recognition of its potential benefits.

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