

# **VA Seeks Contractor to Educate Veterans on Medical Cannabis**

## **The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Seeks Contractors to Analyze and Explain Medical Marijuana Benefits and Risks for Military Veterans as Part of the STEM Project**

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is advancing its efforts to better understand and communicate the potential benefits and risks of medical marijuana to military veterans. Recently, the VA published a request for contractors to help analyze and explain scientific evidence on cannabis through its Systematically Testing the Evidence of Marijuana (STEM) project. This initiative is aimed at improving the way the VA evaluates and communicates cannabis's impact on veterans, particularly in relation to conditions such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), cannabis use disorder, and the effects of cannabis during pregnancy.

### **VA's STEM Project: Key Objectives for Enhancing Medical Marijuana Knowledge Among Clinicians and Veterans**

The STEM project is designed to serve three primary goals: educating clinicians about the benefits and risks of cannabis, identifying key research gaps, and providing resources to both clinicians and the general public about the evidence on cannabis use. The contractor selected for this project will be tasked with conducting literature surveillance, synthesizing systematic reviews, and summarizing the methods and findings of the latest scientific research on cannabis.

The ultimate goal is to facilitate more informed discussions between veterans and clinicians about the potential use of medical marijuana, particularly as more veterans turn to cannabis for relief from PTSD, chronic pain, anxiety, and other health issues. However, the VA also aims to better understand the potential risks of cannabis use, such as the development of cannabis use disorder and the impact of cannabis use during pregnancy.

### **Scope of Work and Contractor Requirements for the STEM Project**

The new VA posting outlines the scope of work for the selected contractor, which is expected to span over the next year, with an optional extension for a second year. The work will involve conducting literature surveillance to create living systematic reviews on five key topics:

PTSD and cannabis use

Cannabis use during pregnancy

Cannabis use disorder

## Treatment options for cannabis use disorder

### Cannabis as a treatment for mood disorders

The contractor will work closely with medical librarians to execute a search strategy and identify relevant studies on each of these topics. Two researchers will independently review all titles and abstracts, as well as the full text of documents, before summarizing their methods and findings. The contractor will then evaluate these studies based on the quality of evidence and the risk of bias.

These findings will be used to create comprehensive reports, which will undergo peer review by independent experts in the field. The ultimate aim is to produce “living reviews” that will be updated as new evidence becomes available, ensuring that clinicians and the public have access to the most up-to-date information on cannabis and its effects.

## **A Closer Look at the VA’s Focus on Cannabis for Military Veterans**

One of the key motivations for the VA’s interest in medical marijuana is the growing number of veterans who are using cannabis to manage chronic pain, PTSD, anxiety, and other mental health conditions. According to recent reports, around 9 percent of U.S. military veterans reported using cannabis in the past year, with about 40 percent of these veterans citing cannabis as a treatment for medical conditions.

The VA is aware of the need for more comprehensive, independent, and up-to-date information on cannabis to help clinicians better understand its potential benefits and risks. Currently, there is no comprehensive resource that synthesizes all available research on cannabis use, which can make it difficult for clinicians to engage in meaningful conversations with veterans about the drug.

Given the variability in the interpretation of existing evidence and the rapidly evolving nature of cannabis research, the VA is looking to contractors who have extensive experience in systematic literature surveillance and meta-analysis. The selected contractor will also need to demonstrate their ability to synthesize complex evidence in a way that is accessible to both clinicians and the general public.

## **Rural Veterans and the Need for Improved Access to Cannabis Information**

The VA has also highlighted the importance of addressing the unique needs of rural veterans, as about 25 percent of U.S. veterans live in rural areas. These veterans may have more limited access to healthcare services, making it essential for the VA to provide accurate, evidence-based information on cannabis that can be shared remotely.

A recent study found that many rural veterans use cannabis to treat conditions like pain, PTSD, anxiety, and insomnia—issues that are highly relevant to the VA’s work. With the growing use of cannabis among veterans, particularly in rural areas, the VA is keen to ensure that healthcare providers are equipped to discuss cannabis use with their patients and offer the most current, evidence-based guidance.

## **The Growing Role of Cannabis in Veterans’ Healthcare**

As cannabis use among veterans continues to rise, recent studies have highlighted the potential benefits of medical marijuana for managing chronic pain and mental health conditions. A 2023 report found that over 90 percent of U.S. military veterans who use medical marijuana reported improvements in their quality of life, with many choosing cannabis as an alternative to prescription medications.

For veterans suffering from chronic pain, medical marijuana may offer significant benefits, as it has been shown to help reduce the use of opioids and other prescription painkillers. One study published in the journal

*Pain* found that marijuana was more effective than prescription medications for treating chronic pain after three months of use, with many patients reporting reduced opioid use as a result.

Moreover, cannabis may help alleviate PTSD symptoms, offering an alternative treatment option for veterans who have struggled to find relief from traditional therapies. Research has indicated that cannabinoids could have therapeutic potential for treating various mental health disorders, including PTSD and anxiety, conditions that are prevalent among veterans.

## **Legal and Legislative Developments in Cannabis for Veterans**

As the VA continues to explore the use of medical marijuana for veterans, there have been several legislative efforts to expand access to cannabis. Advocacy groups like the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) have called for expanded access to plant-based medicines, including marijuana, and have voiced support for bills such as the Marijuana Safe Harbor Act, which would allow veterans to legally possess and use cannabis in accordance with state laws.

In addition, bills like the Veterans Equal Access Act, introduced by Rep. Brian Mast, aim to allow VA doctors to recommend medical marijuana to veterans in states where it is legal. These legislative efforts reflect the growing recognition of cannabis as a legitimate treatment option for veterans suffering from chronic pain, PTSD, and other conditions.

## **The VA's Commitment to Advancing Cannabis Research for Veterans**

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is taking significant steps to improve its understanding of cannabis and its potential benefits and risks for military veterans. Through the STEM project, the VA is working to ensure that clinicians have access to the most accurate, up-to-date information on cannabis, and that veterans can have informed discussions with their healthcare providers about using marijuana to manage their health conditions.

As the VA moves forward with its contractor search and research efforts, the hope is that more veterans will have access to the treatments they need to improve their quality of life. Whether through better education, expanded access to medical marijuana, or new therapeutic options, the VA is committed to supporting the health and well-being of U.S. veterans.

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