

Freedom to Choose: Protecting veterans' access to medical marijuana for PTSD & other wounds of war

August 2013

We are
the Drug
Policy
Alliance.

Freedom to Choose is a statewide public education and civic engagement campaign made up of a broad coalition of veterans, military families, elected officials, service organizations, businesses and concerned citizens. The campaign is dedicated to educating New Mexicans that medical marijuana is a legitimate health care choice. The campaign is also dedicated to training veterans and their families to protect their access to medical marijuana through the political process.

More than two-thirds of New Mexico voters say they support the state's medical marijuana program.

New Mexico's military veterans deserve the freedom to choose the safest treatment for their disabling conditions. When they come home, they deserve access to the medicine that works for them.

Ending Employment Discrimination

Even though medical marijuana is legal in New Mexico, veterans' legal access to medical marijuana is not secure or widely acknowledged by employers and the medical community as proven medicine that relieves symptoms of serious service-related conditions such as combat stress, also known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and chronic pain.

"I was diagnosed with PTSD in 2011 after a few bad episodes and my wife contacted the VA to ask for some help because she was afraid of what was going to happen to me next. The VA put me on prescription pills, but they didn't help me. The prescriptions made things worse, they drove me into a deeper depression. I've been part of the program since 2012 and it has done wonders for me. I can wake up in the morning and do the things I used to enjoy prior to being put on medications that made me like a zombie.

Medical marijuana has given me all the joys of life back, I enjoy my children and my wife. It's given me a whole new look on life. It's sad that employers don't recognize the quality of life this medication gives back to the veterans. We fight for other people to have quality of life, and we should be afforded that opportunity when we get back."

Augustine Stanley, OIF II veteran, lost his job with Bernalillo County as a result of participation in New Mexico medical marijuana program

Barriers to Accessing Medical Marijuana

Federal prohibition, cultural stigma and the lack of medical professionals willing to refer patients to the program are all major barriers for veterans who might otherwise find benefits from medical marijuana. Veterans prescribed multi-drug cocktails to treat their symptoms are most at risk of a fatal drug interaction and veterans with invisible wounds often lack sufficient behavioral health support for their medical issues.

Unfortunately, although medical marijuana is safer than most prescription drugs, and often works to ease multiple symptoms, many New Mexico veterans still find it difficult to access this effective treatment.

Veterans Affairs (VA) medical providers are prohibited from recommending medical marijuana – forcing veterans to seek care outside of the VA health care system, disrupting continuity of care, and increasing their health care costs. People who live on a fixed income often do not have the funds to cover these costs.

Accessing medical marijuana is especially difficult for veterans who live in rural areas as there may not be medical professionals near them who are willing to write recommendations. Rural veterans may have to travel long distances to see a provider and they may not have the ability to transport themselves.

All these factors contribute to the stigma associated with using medicinal marijuana and prevents some veterans from being able to access medical marijuana at all.

Stronger Together – Protecting Medical Marijuana

We are asking for all compassionate New Mexicans to join us in telling lawmakers, medical professionals, and employers to protect the rights of military veterans seeking relief from medical marijuana.

“Cannabis is not only therapeutic, it is significantly safer and less toxic than prescription pain medication. There is no known lethal dose, compared with opiates, which now cause more overdose deaths than car accidents. Cannabis has lower rates of addiction (9 percent) than pain medication (23 percent), alcohol (15 percent), or cigarettes (32 percent).”

-Julie Holland, MD, PhD

Campaign Endorsements

Current and Past Elected Officials

Former New Mexico Governor & Attorney General
Toney Anaya

US Congresswoman Michelle Lujan Grisham
New Mexico State Representative Emily Kane
New Mexico State Representative Antonio Maestas
New Mexico State Representative Bill McCamley
New Mexico State Senator Jerry Ortiz y Pino

Organizations and Businesses

A New PATH (Parents for Addiction Treatment and Healing)
Americans for Safe Access
Arizona Medical Cannabis Nurses Association
Coronado Appraisal Services
Drug Policy Alliance
Herbal Edibles
Legal Shield, LLC
Marijuana Majority
Marijuana Policy Project
Moms United to End the War on Drugs
New Mexico Medical Cannabis Nurses Association
New Mexico Medical Cannabis Patients Alliance
New Mexico Public Health Association
NewMexicann
NORML of Northern New Jersey
Patients Out of Time
ProgressNow New Mexico
R. GreenLeaf Organics
Seebinger Hemp Premium Body Care
South East New Mexico Medical Cannabis Alliance
St. Ann's Corner of Harm Reduction
The Sweet Foundation
Veterans for Alternative Care
Veterans for Medical Cannabis Access
Veterans for Peace - Albuquerque chapter
Veterans for Peace – Santa Fe chapter
Women's Justice Project