Congress May at Last Allow VA Doctors to Prescribe Marijuana to Veterans

About 60 percent of vets returning from Iraq and Afghanistan return home with chronic pain to a medical system that only gives them opioids.

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Congress is considering a new bill that would allow doctors to prescribe medical marijuana to veterans who live in states where cannabis is legal.

The Veterans Medical Marijuana Safe Harbor Act would also protect veterans from losing any benefits from the federal government if they choose to use medical marijuana, which remains illegal at the federal level.

Passage of the bill would also allocate $15 million for the study of the effectiveness of cannabis in treating chronic pain. One of the reasons veterans have pushed for the act is to help researchers determine if marijuana is a potential replacement for prescription opioids.

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Veterans currently excluded

With the recent wave of legalization across the country, 33 states now allow for use of medical marijuana with a prescription from a doctor. However, one the Safe Harbor Act's primary sponsors, Sen. Brian Schatz of Hawaii, said in a statement that veterans don't get the advantages others enjoy if they work through a Veterans Administration doctor.

"This bill gives VA doctors in these states the option to prescribe medical marijuana to veterans, and it also promises to shed light on how medical marijuana can help with the nation's opioid epidemic," he said. "In 33 states, doctors and their patients have the option to use medical marijuana to manage pain – unless those doctors work for the VA and their patients are veterans."

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Veterans and the opioid epidemic.

Veteran advocates have made the argument to loosen restrictions for marijuana for many years. The Veterans Cannabis Coalition, for example, points out that many veterans "struggle under unique health burdens stemming from their honorable service," adding that many have not had success "with available pharmaceuticals."

Issues have developed in the veterans' community because of opioids, which are used to manage pain. According to the Safe Harbor Act, about 60 percent of veterans returning from the Middle East deal with chronic pain.

Opioids account for about 63 percent of all drug deaths in the U.S., according to the proposed Act. In 2011, veterans were found to be twice as likely to die from accidental opioid overdoses as non-veterans. The writers of the proposed Act

reason that medical marijuana, if available to veterans, could serve as a “less harmful alternative to opioids.”

The bill has picked up support from many different organizations. They include the American Academy of Pain Medicine, American Pain Society, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, Veterans Cannabis Coalition, Veterans Medical Cannabis Association, NORML and the National Cannabis Industry Association.

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