



VAHA's Gary Hess to Testify Today
The South Carolina Compassionate Care Act

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The following is speech text, as prepared by Gary Hess, as he is set to testify this morning before the South Carolina House Medical, Military, Public and Municipal Affairs Committee.

My name is Gary Hess, and I am 44 years old. I am the Executive Director of Veterans Alliance for Holistic Alternatives. I served in the Marine Corps for 11 years, both enlisted and as an officer. I led marines through some of the heaviest fighting in Iraq.

My service was cut short in December 2006, when the enemy drove a full-size, triaxle, dump truck, loaded with C4 into the house we were occupying and detonated.

In 2008, I transitioned home with Traumatic Brain Injury, chronic pain, insomnia, and PTSD. I transitioned into the VA healthcare system, where I was overloaded with pharmaceuticals for almost a decade: Adderall, Ambien, Prozac, Zoloft and many other pain killers over time.

By 2016, I was mentally broken. My wife was leaving me, my business was failing, my mental and physical health were degrading, and I could not figure it out, nor could I stop it.

I truly believed that taking my own life, leaving behind a wife and young child, was logically the best answer.

In 2017, exhausted and out of options, I gained access to lab-tested, pharmaceutical cannabis.

*Removed anger from the equation
Stimulated appetite
Allowed for healthy sleep
Facilitated Digestion
Provided consistency in moods
It allowed for clarity and focus
Reduced the Chronic pain*

Within 3 months of integrating cannabis, I was off all the medications prescribed by the VA.

Here's the Sad Truth: If I continued to rely on the VA and the Western Model of Medicine, I would not be here today.

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For the first time in my 10-year struggle, I found something that was safe and effective for me. It was not a gateway drug. For me, and so many others, it has proven to be an exit drug from the addictive pharmaceuticals prescribed to us.

Yet, here in South Carolina, Veterans returning to their communities after service are being forced to become criminals. Placing themselves, their families, and their children at risk to access this medicine.

These Men and Women are Not Criminals. These are our:

Neighbors

Our Co-workers

First Responders

Mothers and Fathers

Coaches and Teachers

Grandparents

And Productive Citizens of South Carolina

These men and women absolutely deserve the medical freedom to pursue other options, like cannabis, as modern treatments continue to fail us.

To put this in perspective, In the last 20 years, since the inception of conflict, we have lost just over 7000 veterans to combat operations. In that same period of time, we have lost over 120,000 veterans to suicide.

Here in South Carolina, with the highest number of Veterans per capita, A veteran takes their own life every 3 days

The Opioid epidemic continues to worsen as overdoses increase in record numbers

We are simply asking for the Medical Freedom...the basic right to seek safe, legal cannabis obtained under the guidance of a doctor and a licensed pharmacist, rather than off of the street.