



Texas Veterans Deserve the Freedom to Choose Their Own Path to Healing

By Dave Walden, Incoming State Commander
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As the Texas Legislature debates the future of hemp-derived products in our state, the 1.5 million veterans who call Texas home are watching with growing concern. For thousands of us, these legal products represent not just a consumer choice, but a lifeline that has allowed us to reclaim our lives after military service. As the debate over the Committee Substitute Senate Bill 3 (CSSB 3) continues, we must ensure that efforts to address legitimate concerns don't strip veterans of therapeutic options that have transformed their lives.

When I returned from combat in Iraq, the VA prescribed me a "cocktail" of medications – more than 20 pills daily. Like thousands of Texas veterans, I found myself trapped in a pharmaceutical fog, unable to function normally or participate in family life. Many of us were prescribed nearly 10,000 pills annually, with dangerous drug interactions that went unidentified by our doctors.

For me and countless others, legal hemp products provided a path to reduce or eliminate these medications. We didn't seek these alternatives to get high – we sought them to get healthy. To become effective and engaged fathers, mothers, spouses, and community members again. Lt. Governor Patrick has called these products "poison," but for many veterans, they've been the antidote to a system that was slowly poisoning us with endless prescriptions. When I hear rhetoric comparing hemp to "bath salts" or other dangerous street drugs, I cannot reconcile it with my experience or that of my fellow veterans who have found healing through these products.

Tyranny is the oppressive and unjust exercise of power. It's when government ignores the will of the people to serve its own interests. That's exactly what LT. Governor Dan Patrick is doing with CSSB 3. He wants to take away a legal option that helps veterans, farmers, and small business owners—not to protect Texans, but to impose his own will. Tyranny isn't always loud. Sometimes, it hides in legislation like this—silencing veterans, destroying jobs, and forcing people back into a system that failed them. CSSB 3 will push veterans like me back to opioids, back to addiction, and for some, back to the brink.

We support improvements to existing regulations that cover proper testing and clear labeling, and we hope lawmakers don't lose sight of the people directly affected by the policy debate – particularly those who have sacrificed for this country. The House's approach of regulation rather than prohibition represents a more balanced path forward. More debate is needed on the idea of implementing proper oversight while preserving access. We're confident Texas lawmakers can find that right pathway that protects our youth while respecting veterans' right to choose what works best for their own health.

The fiscal note for CSSB 3 projects significant economic losses to the Texas hemp industry that grew in the wake of the federal agriculture bill, but the human cost would be even greater. Without access to these products, many veterans would be forced back to pharmaceutical dependence or driven to seek unregulated alternatives – neither outcome serves public health or safety.

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When we raised our right hands to defend the Constitution, we swore to protect American freedoms. We didn't expect that one day, we'd need to advocate for our own freedom to make healthcare choices here at home. After all, if Texas trusted us with sophisticated weapons systems worth billions of dollars to defend America's freedoms abroad, shouldn't lawmakers trust us to make responsible choices about our own healthcare at home?

As this debate continues, we ask our elected officials to remember Texas veterans. We're not asking for special treatment – just the freedom to choose safe, legal options that help us be our best selves. The Texas VFW has shown up for every committee hearing and is confident legislators can hit the right mark that preserves veteran's access to products that have helped thousands transition from merely surviving to actively thriving.

We are grateful to the Texas Senate and House for passing to HB 46 (expansion of medical marijuana Texas Compassionate Use Program) and HB 3717 (study of the psychedelic Ibogaine), two alternatives to opioids and anti-depressants the Texas VFW enthusiastically supports. Let's finish this mission and ensure Texans have access to safe, regulated hemp-derived consumables. Our service to this country didn't end when we took off the uniform. Let's ensure that Texas honors that service by respecting our right to heal in the way that works best for us.

Dave Walden is the incoming State Commander of the Texas VFW, representing more than 60,000 combat veterans across the state.

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