

Congress warming to idea of medical marijuana for veterans

May 20 2016, by Dan Elliott



U.S. Rep. Mike Coffman, R-Colo., directs a question to a witness during a House Veterans Affairs subcommittee field hearing on VA hospitals and prescription drugs for veterans Friday, May 20, 2016, in the State Capitol in Denver. The House subcommittee heard from three Colorado-based VA officials during the field hearing. (AP Photo/David Zalubowski)

Congress is showing an increased willingness to let VA doctors talk to veterans about medical marijuana in states where it's legal, although final

approval is far from certain.

The House approved a measure this week that would let Veterans Affairs Department doctors help their patients sign up for state medical marijuana programs, something the VA now prohibits.

"I'm certainly open to it," Rep. Mike Coffman, a Republican and former Marine from pot-friendly Colorado, said Friday.

A Senate committee approved a similar measure last month but the full Senate hasn't voted.

Medical marijuana is now legal in 23 states and the District of Columbia, but pot remains illegal under federal law. Arguments for medical marijuana are getting a warmer reception from lawmakers amid nationwide concerns about overuse and abuse of prescription painkillers and psychotropic drugs.

Coffman, chairman of a House Veterans Affairs subcommittee on oversight and investigations, said he wasn't enthusiastic when his state first approved medical marijuana. But if the drug helps veterans deal with post-traumatic stress, it could reduce the use of stronger prescription drugs and save taxpayers money, he said.

The measures in Congress wouldn't permit the VA to provide patients with marijuana, Coffman said. It would only free doctors to talk about it with their patients.

Rep. Earl Blumenaur, D-Ore., who sponsored the House measure, said medical marijuana could be safer and more effective than other drugs for veterans suffering from chronic pain or the stress disorder.

Providing access to pot as an alternative "is critical at a time when our

veterans are dying with a suicide rate 50 percent higher than civilians and opiate overdoses at nearly double the national average," Blumenaur said in a written statement.

Research on whether marijuana helps with PTSD has been contradictory and limited, and the VA has warned that increasing numbers of veterans who suffer from it have become dependent on pot.

The VA didn't immediately respond Friday to a request for comment on the proposals in Congress.

Congress has killed similar measures in the past, but backers say the proposals are attracting more votes this time. Blumenaur's measure passed Wednesday 233-189, including 57 Republicans in favor.

Coffman's subcommittee held a hearing in Denver Friday on problems in the way the VA prescribes and keeps track of drugs.

He cited the case of a pharmacy technician at the Denver VA Medical Center who officials said was found in an operating room trying to inject herself with a painkiller stolen from a hospital refrigerator.

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