

TESTIMONY OF PATRICK K. NIGHTINGALE, ESQ
BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA SENATE
COMMITTEE ON LAW AND JUSTICE
ON SB 1182 THE GOVERNOR RAYMOND SHAFER COMPASSIONATE USE OF
MEDICAL CANNABIS ACT

Good morning Chairman McIlhinney and Ferlo and members of the Committee. My name is Richard Schneeman and I am from Allegheny County, Pennsylvania.

I am submitting this testimony to urge the Committee to pass the Governor Raymond Shafer Compassionate Use of Medical Cannabis act.

I am a Coast Guard veteran, having served from 1985 to 1987 Upon my Honorable Discharge as an E3 I enrolled in the Police Academy in Beaver, PA, and began the career I'd always dreamed of having – I became a police officer with the Wilksburg Police Department. Wilksburg is a lower income community just outside the City of Pittsburgh. It is a community with many fine hard working people. But it was and unfortunately remains a community beset with poverty, crime and violence. I was part of the first Federal RICO prosecutions of street gang members in the mid 1990s when a joint federal and local task force targeted the Larimer Avenue Wilksburg (LAW) gang.

I loved my job. It was my career. It was my identity. It was, quite literally, who I was and who I remain. It was in my capacity as a police officer that I first met the previous speaker, Patrick Nightingale, who was our Area Prosecutor from 1997 – 1998. He understood that we used the odor of marijuana to perform traffic stops of known “bad guys” in order to try and search for illegal firearms or the hard drugs we suspected them of hustling. But he helped us to understand that it was a waste of our time and resources to send a defendant downtown to be prosecuted for possession of a small amount of marijuana. For a time he even convinced us to write citations for possession of a “Noxious Weed” – yes, it’s a legitimate summary offense. The look on defense counsel’s faces was priceless.

I retired in 2003 as a Sargent from the Wilksburg Police after being struck by a motor vehicle during the line of duty. After my retirement I lost touch with Patrick for a number of years. Facebook reunited us in 2011. I learned he’d become active in the efforts to legalize cannabis. I am here to tell you that I fully support cannabis reform in all forms – medicinal, recreational and industrial. My comments here will focus on how medicinal cannabis has benefitted me.

Take a good look at me, ladies and gentlemen of the Committee. I am dying. My body has been ravaged by pancreatic cancer. I was diagnosed in February, 2008. I suffer from chronic neuropathic pain and seizure disorder. I am rapidly losing my will to live. When Patrick and I renewed our friendship a couple of years ago I quite literally saw a tear come to his eye when he saw how cancer has ravaged me. I am but a shell of the Coastie and tough street cop I once was.

I use cannabis to help control the seizures that wrack my body frequently. I use it to help relieve the pain I experience daily. My cancer has led to the amputation of my toe and my leg frequently gives out leaving me a crumbled heap on the sidewalk. I use cannabis to simply feel just a little better. As a simple disabled cop collecting my disability and social security relocating to Colorado or Washington or Oregon or even Michigan simply is not an option. The stress of the move would likely kill me.

I listen to Governor Corbett and others claim cannabis is a “gateway” drug and that we must wait for the FDA to affirm what tens of millions of Americans and hundreds of thousands of patients already know – cannabis can be very effective in the treatment of chronic neuropathic pain and seizure disorder. We trust our physicians to dispense highly addictive poison in the form of Oxycontin, Fentanyl, Vicodin, Percoset and other chemical concoctions that today have led to an epidemic of overdose deaths in Southwestern PA. Towards the end of my career I was arresting kids and adults from upper middle class suburbs of Allegheny County who were coming to Wilkesburg to buy heroin. Their story was ALWAYS the same – “my doctor prescribed Oxycontin, etc., and I became addicted. Heroin is cheaper and easier to acquire so here I am.”

Gateway drug? I’ll tell you what the Gateway Drug is – it’s the billions that pharmaceutical companies are reaping shoving this highly addictive medications down our throats. We trust our physicians to prescribe these drugs which, if used therapeutically, are effective. We trust our oncologists to recommend aggressive forms of cancer treatment that aren’t yet FDA approved. But I am denied the opportunity use medicinal cannabis which has NEVER caused a fatal overdose because of an ignorant “reefer madness” mentality? Especially when upwards of 80% of YOUR constituents believe Pennsylvania should have a medicinal marijuana program?

What I find especially galling and offensive is the fact that the Veterans’ Administration here in Pennsylvania will deny me pain medication and potentially treatment if I use medical cannabis while permitting veterans in the twenty states that have medicinal programs to use cannabis if recommended by their doctor. That’s right, ladies and gentlemen, a vet in Colorado or Washington, California, Oregon or Michigan and even the District of Columbia may use medicinal cannabis without fear of losing benefits. Why are our veterans here in PA being discriminated against over a plant that has never killed anyone? You were all happy to “support the troops” when sending our young men and women to die in foreign lands. Why can’t you support veterans who need you now?

Its time to take the politics out of this issue and place it squarely in the hands of the only people qualified to discuss medicinal cannabis – our doctors. I look forward to discussing this treatment option with my neurologist and my oncologist.

Thank you for this opportunity to be heard.

Sincerely,

1.26.14

/s/ Richard Schneeman
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