

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS



Statement of

CAPTAIN JOHN GARDELL
Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire

before the

Senate Finance Committee
on

Use of Cannabis Products

February 22, 2024

Thank you, Chairman/Chairwoman and distinguished members of the Senate. My name is John Gardell, and I am a Fire Captain with the Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire assigned to Truck 8 in the East Liberty section of the city. I joined Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire in 2005 after serving as a fire fighter and Lieutenant in the neighboring Borough of Wilkinsburg. Additionally, I was a member of the Pennsylvania Air National Guard, where I also served as a fire fighter. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the International Association of Fire Fighters, General President Edward A. Kelly, and the over 340,000 professional fire fighters and emergency medical personnel who serve as this nation's all-hazards emergency response force. Over the last 100 years, the IAFF has been and continues to be the nation's leading voice on fire safety, especially as it impacts the health and well-being of our nation's fire service professionals.

I come before you today to offer my testimony and experience on the use of marijuana by emergency service workers. In May 2018, the City of Pittsburgh adopted a policy allowing the members of the Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire to use medical marijuana to treat various illnesses. This policy was brought forward by Pittsburgh Fire Fighters Local No.1 of the International Association of Fire Fighters. Members of Local No.1 who had served in the armed forces during various conflicts were fighting numerous illnesses through the assistance of Veterans Affairs. Many had been recommended by their treating physicians to try marijuana as a treatment for a number of issues including Post Traumatic Stress Injuries, sleep disorders, and chronic pain.

These fire fighters had been dealing with these illnesses in various ways. Some turned to prescription medications, including sleep aids, mood-altering drugs, and opioids to relieve their symptoms. Many found that they did not like the lingering affects that followed or how these medications altered their ability to function. Other fire fighters used, and in some cases abused, alcohol in an attempt to deal with their illnesses.

Since the inception of the marijuana policy in the Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire, many members have reported that their quality of life has dramatically increased, while alcohol-related incidents, including driving under the influence and public intoxication, have plummeted.

This policy did bring with it some concerns regarding how administration and more specifically, supervisors, would handle an employee that was unfit for duty due to marijuana usage. Through discussion, it was determined that marijuana would be treated as any other prescription medication. Many prescription medications do not allow for the use or operation of a motor vehicle or other machinery. While a member may have a valid prescription for a medication, they are not permitted to use their medication while on duty if it could potentially hamper their ability to perform job-related tasks.

Supervisors or company officers in the City of Pittsburgh are charged with the duty to ensure that all personnel under their supervision are fit for duty. If a member reports for work unfit, to include being under the influence of drugs (including those prescribed legally), alcohol, or

mentally unfit for duty, it is their responsibility to send the individual for a reasonable suspicion test, by going through the chain of command. They are also responsible for documentation of the incident, including what actions led them to believe that the member was unfit for duty. Since the inception of the marijuana policy over 5 years ago, *not one incident has been reported involving marijuana usage.*

As a fire fighter for 27 years, serving in both the United States Air Force and in the City of Pittsburgh, I have personally battled with Post Traumatic Stress Injuries. Being diagnosed in 2019, I had found myself using over-the-counter sleep medications at an alarming rate in an attempt to sleep or “shut down” on my nights off. While my usage never carried over to work, I found that my tolerance had built and that continued usage would create numerous other health issues, some that had already begun.

In late 2019, I was prescribed medical marijuana as a treatment for my injury. I was very uncomfortable at the time, due to my unfamiliarity with marijuana and the numerous preconceived notions of its use. As a company officer, a father, and a husband, it was not only difficult to admit to needing help, but to then turn to a substance that was highly scrutinized was troublesome. I worried about what others would think, that I would lose respect of those I relied on, or that I would be viewed differently in my position. This could not have been further from the truth. Since my usage of marijuana as a treatment for my PTSD, I have found that I no longer am hampered by broken sleep on my nights at home, I am less irritable around loved ones, I am able to be more productive on my off days, which has allowed me to worry less and focus on my job and teaching while on duty.

While many still fight the the stigma of using marijuana for their illnesses. Numerous fire fighters in the City of Pittsburgh have turned to its use to increase the quality of their lives and those around them. As more States in our great nation continue to allow marijuana usage for both medical and recreational purposes, it is important that we recognize how it can benefit those that suffer the most. Please help the men and woman that are depended on everyday and allow them the ability to benefit from the medical uses of marijuana.