

TESTIMONY OF Bradley D. Walter
BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
ON HB 1393 COMPASSIONATE USE ACT OF 2009

Good morning, Chairmen Oliver and Baker, and Members of the Committee. I am Bradley Walter, a 31 year old HIV+ gay man from a sleepy little town in northeastern Pennsylvania called Larksville. With the help of a combination of fantastic (and quite expensive) antiretroviral medications (Reyataz, Norvir, and Truvada), I live a mostly active, normal, healthy life. My viral load is undetectable and my CD4 count (white blood cells that fight the HIV infection) is well above 400. I have a partner of five years who is HIV negative and we have a fantastic healthy life together. We own a lovely ranch home in a great development, two new cars, and two very sweet cats.

While my antiretroviral meds keep me quite "healthy" by keeping my viral load down and my CD4 count up, they negatively affect my quality of life. For me, that negativity is *severe* digestive problems from the medications. Every day of my life is spent dealing with the pains of diarrhea, constipation, digestive muscle spasms, unbelievable stomach and intestinal gas, and in the worst cases, inability to eat without immediately vomiting it up. Even on my best days I spend up to 3 hours a day in the bathroom. These digestive problems are nothing new to anyone who is on, or takes care of someone on antiretroviral combination therapy.

I have found that one thing that provides moderate relief for NEARLY ALL of those digestive problems is the use of whole plant cannabis. You can ask any health professional who works with and treats HIV patients and they will tell you the same. In California they even legalized it over ten years ago primarily because of the influential gay men who saw the incredible relief that it gave to their fellow HIV+ brethren. It provides me with a healthy appetite that allows me to maintain a doctor monitored healthy weight. My infectious diseases doctor, Dr. Shubhra Shetty, even supports my use of whole plant cannabis as a primary means to control and lessen mine, as well as other patient's gastrointestinal pain.

Currently, the downside of this for me is that every time I have to purchase my medicine, I have to do so by illegal, and sometimes scary, means. My partner supports me in everything I do. Thankfully he understands the positive benefits whole plant cannabis provides me and has seen firsthand the positive effects of it has on my overall quality of life. He's a bank manager for a local community bank. If anything were to happen involving law enforcement while he were with me purchasing my medicine, his 15+-year career with one bank would be in jeopardy. I recall one time driving our car down a dark alley in a not-so-friendly section of town to meet someone to purchase my medicine from. I looked over to my partner and he jokingly started to sing, "What I did for Love..." It would absolutely crush me if I ever put his career in jeopardy. Even if that never happened, I am still supporting criminal activity every time I purchase my medicine. I don't like doing this, but it's my only option. If this bill were to pass, I would grow it safely and securely in my alarmed home for my own personal and private consumption. I have NO interest in participating in any more criminal activity once I can legally medicate with, purchase and grow whole plant cannabis. I would even be willing to participate in a non-profit cooperative cannabis medicine exchange

Many opponents of medicinal marijuana say things like "There are pharmaceuticals that provide all of the benefit of smoking marijuana, but in a controlled dosage and environment". Yes, there are those pharmaceuticals, and I have a prescription by my doctor for one of them: Marinol (Dronabinol). I can tell you, after taking this medication legally for over two years now, that it DOES NOT provide the same relief. Not even CLOSE. No pharmaceutical could ever re-create the complex compounds found in whole plant cannabis. Also, the cost of the medication is absolutely ASTRONOMICAL; just over **\$1300.00** a month for 120 pills. I am a Medicaid recipient, as I can't get private insurance anywhere because of my HIV status. If they were to legalize medicinal marijuana for me, that would cut, for just **ONE** person, **\$15,600.00** a year out of the Medicaid budget. That is money that could be used for far better reasons, as well as cut my individual annual cost of medications by over 25%.

It's not just about the Marijuana. It's about quality of life for so many people like me, reducing the skyrocketing costs of our public health system, and ending the legal punishment and potential life changing criminal charges being brought against patients every day.

Thank you very much for your time, I really hope that we can push this through so that it may provide a higher **quality of life** for the hundreds of thousands of HIV+ Pennsylvanians, and possibly the MILLIONS of HIV+ persons nationwide. Thank you for this opportunity to be heard.

Sincerely,

Dated: / /2009

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