

Testimony in Support of HB 2244
Before the House Judiciary Committee
March 12, 2019
Presented by Allen Peake

In January of 2014, I had an encounter with a constituent that changed the course and direction of my life. I had been in the Georgia State House for 7 years at the time, was a conservative Republican in a very conservative state. I have never smoked marijuana, never done any drugs at all. One would say I was very anti-drug. And then I received an email from Janea Cox, with a very simple message - *Please help me save my daughter.*

Janea's daughter Haleigh had a medical condition that was causing 100-200 seizures a day. They had seen a CNN report on Charlotte Figi, a young Colorado girl with the same condition, who had started taking medical cannabis oil, and it had greatly reduced the seizures in young Charlotte. Janea wanted to try this for Haleigh, but medical cannabis oil was illegal in Georgia. She wanted me to help change Georgia's law to allow her daughter to use medical cannabis. I was very skeptical, but the more I heard her story, the more I was intrigued.

And then I met Haleigh several days later.....



She was on her deathbed at the children's hospital, and when I saw her, I was confronted with the question all of us should ask ourselves - ***What would I do if this was MY child?***

And the answer was very simple - I would crawl over broken glass to stop the seizures that were ravaging their little precious body.

So that began the journey for me to use whatever political capital I had to pass legislation to allow Georgia citizens, in consultation with their physician, to have the right to legally possess medical cannabis oil. We introduced legislation in the 2014 session that failed due to political wrangling between the House and the Senate. After that disappointing session, we started the Journey of Hope Fund, that paid for 17 Georgia families to travel to Colorado, live there for up to 6 months, and try medical cannabis oil for their children. The results confirmed that it helped stop, or even eliminate seizure activity.

We tried again in January of 2015, introducing HB 1 - Haleighs Hope Act, that was eventually signed by the Governor in April of 2015. This Act allowed the legal possession of up to 20 ounces of medical cannabis oil for 8 medical conditions - Seizures, cancer, ALS, MS, Crohn's disease, Mitochondrial disease, Parkinson's, and Sickle Cell disease. The oil could not contain more than 5% THC, which was needed for most patients. And citizens had to be registered with the state, by their physician, on the newly created Low THC oil registry. Georgia's medical refugees could finally come home.



But there was still no way to access the oil. Citizens were faced with breaking federal law to obtain it from another state, or breaking state law by making it themselves.

In January, 2016 we attempted to pass legislation allowing the cultivation of marijuana for the growth, processing and distribution of medical cannabis oil only, as defined in Georgia law. We faced fierce opposition from law enforcement and many faith based organizations (as we did when we passed Haleigh's Hope Act). We also had a Governor that was adamantly opposed to any form of cultivation of marijuana in our state. So our attempts failed.

But we were able to add 6 more conditions to the law in 2017 in SB 16 - Tourette's, Autism, EB (rare skin disease), Alzheimer's, AIDS, and peripheral neuropathy, as well as anyone in hospice care. Then in 2018, we added two more conditions in HB 65 - Intractable pain, and PTSD. The 2018 bill also created a commission with the charge of making a recommendation of how to solve the access issue that still hinders Georgia citizens from obtaining the oil.

Since Haleigh's Hope Act was put into law in April, 2015, we now have over 8,500 citizens who have registered with the state to legally possess medical cannabis oil. In the four years since that law went into place, we have had zero public safety issues related to medical cannabis oil, there has been no public health hazard, and there has been no real, valid attempt to legalize marijuana for recreational use. But there has been a huge gaping hole in our law - no access to the medical cannabis oil.

In the meantime, citizens have been faced with difficult decisions - break the law to get medicine for their loved one, or see their loved ones suffer. An underground network that I have been involved with has been providing medical cannabis oil to almost 1,000 citizens. We abide by all aspects of current Georgia law by only providing it to properly registered citizens, and give it to them at no cost. We are not involved in the transportation of the product across state lines, so we are not breaking federal law. It shows up in Georgia somehow, some way. I don't ask a lot of questions. We do know it comes from a reputable manufacturer, and is lab tested for purity. It's contents are all within the parameters of Georgia law. But it is not a system that is sustainable for the long term.

Fortunately, with a new Governor in place this year, a medical cannabis cultivation bill has been introduced in the 2019 legislative session. It passed the House last week, and has a very good chance of passing the Senate in the next few weeks. It would provide a limited licensure program to allow the growing, processing and dispensing of medical cannabis oil, as currently defined in state law, in a tightly regulated infrastructure. Up to 10 licenses would be granted.

I strongly recommend that action be taken to allow your citizens to have the legal right, in consultation with their doctor, to possess medical cannabis oil, with the proper amount of THC limitation, for multiple medical conditions.

I receive a message almost daily from someone in our state who has benefited from our law, and our delivery of oil to them. The stories tell of changed lives, improved quality of life, and unbelievable gratitude for being allowed the option of medical cannabis oil for their legitimate debilitating medical condition.

On behalf of your hurting citizens, I urge you to have the courage to pass legislation allowing possession, and access, to this life changing option.