

'Healing for Our Nation's Heroes'

This veteran-based nonprofit organization partnered with a VFW Post in Arizona to host a cannabis festival for veterans

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When the Veterans Cannabis Group partnered with VFW Post 720 in Phoenix for an inaugural event on Jan. 8, it marked the start of a new relationship set to help and inform veterans.

The VCG's CannaVet Festival at Post 720 welcomed more than 1,000 veterans and their families, promoting a safe and friendly space to learn and use cannabis provided by local brands and dispensaries.

"We were thrilled when VCG reached out and asked if they could use our facility to provide a day of fellowship, learning and healing for our nation's heroes," Post 720 Commander Herb Harrison said. "For us, it was a no-brainer. It's imperative that our veterans have safe access to medicines that could help alleviate their service-connected physical and emotional traumas in order to have post-service success."

Founded by Aaron Augustis as a nonprofit advocacy organization in 2016, VCG has steadily built a support system of donors and sponsors since its inception, which includes Weedmaps, a global tech company renowned in the cannabis industry.

For Augustis, a veteran who deployed to northern Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom as an Army combat engineer with 37th Engineer Battalion (Combat) (Airborne) from April to November 2003, the ethos for VCG came from his own experience with cannabis.

"I had combat-related PTSD after my service, and since I'm from northern California and cannabis was legalized for medicinal purposes, I started using it," said Augustis, a Life member of VFW Post 7816 in Novato, California. "I quickly found that it helped calm me down and make daily tasks more tolerable. It helped clear my mind and focus on where I was, not letting my anxiety overcome me."

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Augustis' experience compares to the positive effects found in an FDA-regulated study last year by the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), a San Jose, California-based, nonprofit founded in 1986 to raise awareness and understanding of psychedelic substances. In that study, the research showed improvements in PTSD symptoms among people smoking cannabis blends with a 9 percent THC concentration.

Though federal law prevents the Department of Defense or VA from studying the medicinal benefits of cannabis, part of VCG's mission is to advocate for cannabis' federal legalization and subsequent VA approval for veterans across the nation.

"Cannabis is not a cure-all, but it is another powerful tool in the toolbox that has helped veterans like myself for a long time," Augustis said. "We do this for veterans who are suffering in areas where it is not legal, hoping it becomes federally legal for the VA to eventually prescribe it to our veterans as a substitute for drugs like opioids."

Since its inception, VCG has participated in many pro-cannabis events across the country, from the Cali Vibes Festival in Long Beach, California, to the Errl Cup, an Arizona based company that runs cannabis festivals focused on consumer appreciation and dispensary accountability.

It was through VCG's Errl Cup connections that the inaugural CannaVet Festival became a reality at Post 720 in Phoenix.

"Errl Cup co-founder Paul Bishop, a combat veteran himself, took the lead in planning and directing the event," Augustis said. "He was fast and brilliant in setting up the event, coordinating with the local fire department and dispensaries."

With help from Bishop and Post 720 volunteers, VCG's vision for its first-ever CannaVet Festival proved a success in the eyes of Augustis. The event hosted a plethora of veterans from all across the country, who basked in a safe environment offering live music, food, educational seminars and networking possibilities.

"We hosted it inside and outside our Post," Harrison said. "The parking lot had about 20-25 booths, and inside we hosted lectures that even included cooking classes using cannabis as an ingredient."

Harrison recalled walking amongst his fellow veterans, stopping at several booths to learn about cannabis and how it had helped several of the veterans in attendance. From testimonials to sharing military and post-military experiences, the event itself served as a pleasant and therapeutic experience.

"It was such a great and friendly atmosphere," Harrison said. "The veterans were there to learn, and [those manning] the booths were very eager and carried lots of brochures and

literature to educate. Everyone was sharing experiences and education.”

Sharing Harrison’s feelings on the CannaVet Festival, Augustis, too, believed the event accomplished what it had set out to do.

“Altogether, it was a very successful event,” Augustis said. “It was an ideal and fun environment to learn, try and become educated about medicinal cannabis for our nation’s heroes.”

Augustis hopes this inaugural festival at Post 720 can blossom into a partnership with more VFW Posts across the country.

Since VCG’s inception in 2016, the nonprofit’s mission statement has been to provide education, safe access, information on VA resources and benefits, and an opportunity for veterans to work with other veterans within the cannabis industry.

In doing so, VCG continues to spread the word at a national level in hopes of also erasing a draconian stigma surrounding cannabis, which could lead to strengthened relationships between veteran communities and their local cannabis businesses and governments.

“We hope this event can be looked at as a successful model for other VFW Posts,” Augustis said. “The big picture is to show other local commanders that cannabis is helpful, showing them how to receive help from their local brands and dispensaries willing to educate and provide medicine for veterans.”

The VCG model, according to Augustis, can help veterans across the country, but it also can offer an alternative to another longstanding stigma looming over VFW Posts.

“A lot of VFW Posts have bars, and that’s a great way to raise money,” Augustis said. “But alcohol is bad for you, and in the long-term, toxic. It doesn’t really help with PTSD, and cannabis isn’t toxic and can help alleviate these PTSD symptoms. We are Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans, so we’re the next ones to lead VFW Posts. And this is something we believe in.”

For more information on getting involved with the Veterans Cannabis Group, visit their homepage at veteranscannabisgroup.com<https://veteranscannabisgroup.com/>.

This article is featured in the 2022 June/July issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.