ASA Urging Safe Banking Access in Relief Bill

Americans for Safe Access is one of several cannabis advocacy organizations that sent a letter last week to House leaders, urging Congress to address safe banking access in federal relief efforts.

Yesterday, House Democrats unveiled their latest bill, which includes provisions to allow cannabis businesses to use financial services available to other businesses. If passed by the Congress and signed into law, this reform would have far-reaching effects for patients and the cannabis industry.

The letter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D, CA-12) and Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R, CA-23) notes that coronavirus infection risks are exacerbated by requiring cannabis businesses and consumers to use cash. Handling cash has been identified as a significant hazard because, as the letter notes, “viruses can live on cash for up to 17 days.” Many retailers have stopped accepting it, yet federal law prevents cannabis businesses from accepting credit cards.

The House-passed Secure and Fair Enforce-ment (SAFE) Banking Act would fix that by making the financial services merchants rely on available to state-licensed cannabis businesses. Introduced over a year ago by Rep. Ed Perlmutter (D, CO-7), the bill passed the House last November on a vote of 321-103 and is pending before the Senate banking committee.

“The lack of access to financial institutions places industry workers, government employees, and the public at-large at risk,” the letter says. “[A]n industry limited to cash transactions must do business in close proximity to the public, including immunocompromised and otherwise medically vulnerable patients.”

Cannabis dispensaries and retailers have been designated essential businesses in many states. Organizations that signed the letter are ASA, Global Alliance for Cannabis Commerce, Marijuana Policy Project, Minority Cannabis Business Association, National Association of Cannabis Businesses, National Cannabis Industry Association, National Cannabis Roundtable, NORML, Policy Center for Public Health and Safety, and Safe and Responsible Banking Alliance.

Advocates have also been lobbying Congress to allow cannabis businesses to access Small Business Administration (SBA) coronavirus relief programs. The SBA has stated that all medical cannabis businesses are barred, as are any businesses that work with or for them, including accountants and lawyers.

In late April, Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-OR) introduced HR 6602, the Emergency Cannabis Small Business Administration bill. The Senate included the hemp industry in a coronavirus relief bill it passed, which will allow farmers access to the federal Economic Injury Disaster Loan program. The hemp industry will also be eligible for SBA’s Paycheck Protection Program under the new bill.

A coalition of hemp industry associations had sent a sign-on letter to the head of the Small Business Administration asking to be included.

With the recent addition of Massachusetts, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has so far approved 17 state hemp programs. A number of tribes have also been approved to cultivate hemp.

Under the 2018 Farm Bill, hemp and its extracts and derivatives are legal when produced as part of a state program approved by the USDA.

ASA Shows Support for Essential Workers

In March, as coronavirus shutdown orders went into effect, ASA led the fight to keep cannabis businesses open. As a result, patients continue to have access to the medicine they need. ASA understands that the situation has been challenging for medical cannabis businesses and workers as they implement new rules and policies to keep patients, products, and employees safe.

As a thank you to all the businesses and employees working during the pandemic to help others, ASA is offering all essential businesses and their employees a free year of ASA membership.

New business members who have taken advantage of this include: Nature’s Gifts, ForwardGro, LLC, Gifts From The Earth, Inc, CannaSafe, Norml National Care Givers, Pure Wellness Medical, Empowering Solutions Healthcare Management, Renaissance Of Natural Health And Knowledge, YouGroGurlr, Takoma Wellness Center, Sweet Tree Farms, Maryland Hemp Exchange, Hemp Haven Chesapeake, East Fork Cultivars, Rylie’s Sunshine LLC, Licensed to Care, Popped.NYC, Om of Medicine, Spoke Bicycle Café, Canna Care Docs, Takoma Wellness Center, Maryland Natural Treatment Solutions DBA- Oceanside Cannabis, Rylie’s Smile Foundation Inc/501c3, Clarified Confections, Anacostia Organics, Sweetleaf Collective, Reference Labs, CW California Inc, Releaf Social Enterprise, Marleys CBD LLC, and Mindful MMJ Ohio.

Essential businesses or employees can sign up at safeaccessnow.org/covid-19_business or safeaccessnow.org/covid-19_employee.

Five Ways You Can Show Support

Whether they’re working in a dispensary to provide medicine, preparing the food we eat, saving lives in the ICU or delivering packages, essential workers deserve our appreciation.

For ways to show appreciation for their service, ASA’s blog has a list of five ways you can thank the essential workers in your life. Among the ways you can help are dropping off food, donating protective gear, supporting their

Continued on page 2

Hemp Industry May Get More Federal Relief

The Senate included the hemp industry in a coronavirus relief bill it passed, which will allow farmers access to the federal Economic Injury Disaster Loan program. The hemp industry will also be eligible for SBA’s Paycheck Protection Program under the new bill.

A coalition of hemp industry associations had sent a sign-on letter to the head of the Small Business Administration asking to be included.

With the recent addition of Massachusetts, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has so far approved 17 state hemp programs. A number of tribes have also been approved to cultivate hemp.

Under the 2018 Farm Bill, hemp and its extracts and derivatives are legal when produced as part of a state program approved by the USDA.
An entrepreneurial itch attracted Nico Murillo to cannabis. As a certified research chef whose 20 years of experience includes more than a dozen years doing product development, she suspected the emerging cannabis edible industry presented opportunities. Texas had just opened applications for cannabis edible manufacturers, so she submitted her plan, one of 43 to do so. The process has been slow – only three licenses have so far been awarded, and just two are operational – but it has brought Nico into contact with patient advocates in the state. She credits the “autism moms” and patients in Texas with a new outlook that extends deep into her life.

“I’ve always been for the underdog,” Nico says. “Patients have shown me my destiny, what I should fight for.”

As she began advocacy work at the state capital, she discovered that there was a lack of medical focus, as most of the groups were focused on adult-use legalization. She asked around to some mentors, who suggested Americans for Safe Access. Nico didn’t know much to begin with, but she met committed activists such as the Zartler family, ASA Courage Award recipients who were profiled in the July 2018 issue of the ASA newsletter, and decided to launch a Texas ASA chapter. The Zartlers became original partners and board members as the group applied for federal 501(c)3 non-profit status last September.

Texas for Safe Access started its first public meetings in January. They only had four meetings pre-COVID-19, but they were already largely digital.

“The transition may have actually helped the chapter,” Nico says. “People can get to meetings now that we livestream them online each month, and we have an active presence in online education.”

Education is the focus for the chapter now, as the Texas state legislature only meets every two years, and then only for 140 days. The chapter has half-a-dozen registered nurses on board, guiding initiatives. Chapter Board Member Olga Obie, MD, an emergency physician with a background in naturopathy, has been contributing to the education efforts, including 15-20 minute question and answer sessions that they stream online through Facebook and post on their YouTube channel.

“The ASA message has worked out well, creating a professional, safe environment without the stigma of recreational use,” Nico says. “But we’re still struggling to reach outside of cannabis space to seniors, the Latin and minority communities – people who don’t know anything but are looking for medical alternatives.”

Since May is Military Appreciation Month, working with veterans is the chapter’s focus right now. They are preparing to release some COVID-related info and are actively fundraising to create more content, including more patient testimonials on their website.

“For our chapter, what is most important is to get stories out so policy makers can see the patient experience,” Nico says.

When the Texas legislature returns in 2021, Nico knows they will need to be ready for intense lobbying, since approximately 10,000 bills hit lawmakers each session.

Nico’s experience in product development for FritoLay and Pepsico means she is used to working with analytical labs and has been inside all the largest food manufacturing facilities in the U.S. and Canada. She hopes to contribute that experience to guidance for the cannabis industry on food safety handling, glyphosate testing and worker safety standards.

“Texas has the potential to be a big producer of hemp oil, but what matters is access across the board, not just for the few,” says Nico. “That’s why we’re fighting for home grow, as it solves the problem for patients in remote rural areas.”

Nico is still hoping to get her edible business licensed, and she’s preparing to launch a skin care line, but she’s not worried about the business side. Through her advocacy she’s gone through her own healing. She’s found what she calls her destiny, as well as new goals, priorities and a vision of the value of service.

“I’m glad to have the opportunity to lead this chapter and to be part of a larger organization,” says Nico. “We want to collaborate on some big moves to make safe access national.”

ASA has been collecting data on how the COVID-19 changes are affecting medical cannabis patients, the cannabis industry, and local communities. We hope to use this information to improve our advocacy and gauge the effectiveness of our recommendations to states. All questions are optional, so feel free to skip any you do not feel comfortable answering. This is the last week of data collection, so please take a few minutes today to fill out the survey at www.safeaccessnow.org/COVID-19_survey.

ESSENTIAL, continued from page 1
families, providing generous tips, and simply saying thank you. See ASA’s blog for details.

Along with looking after essential workers, it is also important to remember those in our society most in need. Food pantries are under unprecedented pressure because of increased need for food assistance, decreased donations due to restaurant closures, and a reduced pool of volunteers. If you can, now is the time to help charities or a foodbank near you.

Most importantly, when you interact with someone who is providing a needed service, be friendly and kind. The stress of this pandemic can put everyone on edge. Even the smallest gesture of kindness can help.