

TOP TEN LIST OF REASONS TO LEGALIZE MARIJUANA IN CONNECTICUT

PUBLIC HEALTH COMMITTEE HEARING CONNECTICUT HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

March 7, 2017

Bill Sponsor: Rep. Melissa Ziobron (R-34)
Co-Sponsors: Rep. Robyn Porter (D-94)
Rep. Toni Walker (D-93)

We are here to testify in support of HB5314, *an Act Concerning the Taxation and Regulation of the Retail Sale and Cultivation of Marijuana for Use by Persons Twenty-one Years of Age or Older*. We have all submitted individual testimonies but we are going to try and shorten this because there are so many people to testify in support and in opposition. So we're going to do a Top Ten List for you.

But before we get to that, I just want to make a brief statement. The time has come for us to consider as a state the legalizing of the recreational use of marijuana by adults. The legislation I am proposing intends to do that in the most comprehensive way possible. I realize this is a difficult topic for many, but as legislators we have an obligation to tackle important, and even controversial, issues head-on, while exploring and considering all relevant points of view. And I know that many of you, and many of our constituents, have those very important points of view.

#1 – Legalized Marijuana is Safer than Alcohol and Tobacco. The two most damaging drugs, alcohol and tobacco. There are more than half-a-million deaths annually from these two substances. They also lead to countless illnesses and injuries that affect society in health care costs, lost productivity, and law enforcement expenses. Marijuana has never cost one fatal overdose, never, in 7,000 recorded years of human use. Opponents worry about putting a third legal drug on the menu, as if marijuana isn't already the third most popular drug used in America. It's already on the menu. You just have to commit a crime in order to use it.

#2 – Marijuana Prohibition is a Costly Failure. The War on Pot costs \$42 billion per year. This year is the 80th anniversary of the Marijuana Tax Act, the first nationwide attempt to suppress pot smoking. Back then maybe a few hundred thousand people nationwide were smoking reefers. Today, it is more likely than not that someone over the age of 50 has tried pot, and there are over 30 million Americans consuming cannabis on a regular basis, whether it's on the menu or not.

The cost of the counterproductive prohibition is staggering. Since President Nixon declared a War on Drugs, over 25 million Americans have been arrested for marijuana violations, costing us over \$1 trillion to prosecute. But in the four states that have legalized marijuana, marijuana arrests have plummeted, crime has decreased, and youth use hasn't budged.

#3 – Legalized Marijuana Provides Oversight and Safety – Moving forward with regulation of marijuana will allow us to address a variety of issues that we are facing in this state. By allowing the Department of Consumer Safety to oversee and regulate the cultivation and sale of marijuana, it can be assured that there is safety and oversight brought to the existing and sometimes unsafe unregulated market. By

providing a regulated framework to this market, it would enable such things as right requirements for child resistance packaging, testing products for contaminants such as mold and other types of carcinogenic, establishing clear labeling with respect to potency and serving sizes, and bans on certain products that would appeal to children.

#4 – Legalized Marijuana Replaces Toxic and Addictive Pharmaceuticals. America is suffering from an opioid overdose epidemic. Legal pharmaceutical drugs kill, and they kill whether it is Connecticut teens, younger adults, or older Americans. Marijuana is the one plant that can be grown at little cost and used to replace over 17 popular pharmaceutical medications. The pharmaceutical industry knows this, which is why one of them recently in Arizona contributed almost \$500,000 to defeat legalization there. They are the maker of Fentanyl, the opioid pain killer that has killed our residents and people across this country. It's 100 times more powerful than heroin, and that's one of the reasons I support the legalization of marijuana.

#5 – Marijuana Prohibition Supports Gangs, Cartels, and Terrorists. Legalized marijuana would reduce money to gangs. CNBC estimates that the marijuana trade moves as much as \$120 million each year. Due to its illegal nature, a good chunk of that goes toward criminal gangs. The drug trade has long been a source of income for organized crime. But now that four states have legalized marijuana, their domestic product is beating Mexican imported marijuana in both price and quality. Mexican farmers growing for the vicious, violent drug cartels have seen their returns from \$100 per kilo to under \$25. Legalization isn't going to put the cartels out of business. They are criminals who will turn to other crimes for their employment. But we can take from them the market for the most widely used drug and shrink their customer base substantially. Here's another way to look at it. Why should we continue to give business opportunities to violent criminals who don't pay taxes and follow no regulations?

#6 – Legalized Marijuana Protects Kids Better than Prohibition. A regulated market in Connecticut would protect the youth of the state by the majority of marijuana from the street which do not card in to a state licensed outlet under strict requirements for an age regulation for verification. Portions of revenue raised from the taxed sale of marijuana can be allocated to drug abuse prevention programs that help reduce youth use.

Honest drug education like we have for tobacco and alcohol, is much more effective in reducing youth use than fear-mongering that comes along with prohibition. About 750,000 Americans were arrested for marijuana –related offenses in 2012. And more than 87% for possession alone. That means a person is arrested every 48 seconds for marijuana. They will have a drug-related offense on their record. More people lose their jobs, or find it difficult to find employment, parents can lose custody of their children, college students can lose their federally funded financial aid, people lose their public housing benefits, those who are on parole or probation or have past offenses could very well find themselves in jail or prison again. According to leading marijuana policy researchers, about 40,000 state and federal prison inmates have a current conviction involving marijuana. About half of them are in prison for marijuana-related offenses alone. I just want to say I am also attaching all the statistics for 2012 to demonstrate that.

#7 – Legalized Marijuana Opens the Possibility of Industrial Hemp – The demonization of marijuana is so entrenched in America that we even ban the non-psychoactive variety known as industrial hemp. We are one of the few countries that engages in the banning of a plant because it looks like one that may get you high. It's a little like banning powdered sugar because it resembles cocaine. While many states have passed laws allowing for industrial hemp cultivation, the federal government has passed laws

allowing for cultivation (check this), this is all a work-around for allowing a crop that our federal fathers grew legally.

#8 – Legalized Marijuana is a Safe Therapeutic Supplement. Marijuana is an effective treatment. We've come to realize that in the state of Connecticut. For many serious illnesses like AIDS, glaucoma, cancer, multiple sclerosis, marijuana is an effective treatment, and in some cases the only treatment. While half the states have initiated measures for the medical use of marijuana, that doesn't legalize the use of marijuana by patients. Even in California, where nearly anybody can get a medical marijuana recommendation, and possession of less than an ounce is less than \$100 a ticket, there are over 2,000 people who go to jail for possession of marijuana alone serving an average of over five months in jail. That's because doctor visits and medical cards cost money. It costs upwards of \$400 in some states to apply, qualify, and register for a medical card. For a person in poverty (check this) this should not be covered by law treated as a criminal offense. This is an herb safer than over-the-counter aspirin or cough syrup.

#9 – Marijuana Raises Millions in Tax Revenue – The Massachusetts model uses excise taxes, sales taxes, and licenses and in the first year it has an estimate of \$8 million, the next year \$30 million, the fourth year, \$45 million. Colorado has revenue of \$13 million the first year, \$65 the second year, and \$113 million the third year. And it also gives a local option for those cities that want to opt out.

#10 – Legalized Marijuana Works – Not for nothing, marijuana has never killed anyone. On the contrary, the magnitude of its harm comes in the form of mass incarceration, and life-long barriers to higher education, employment, and housing created by prohibition. While the time is long overdue for us to put a rest to the fallacy associated with marijuana, we should embrace the research in support. States have not had an adverse impact on public health and safety according to a study commissioned by the Cato Institute, a Washington D.C.-based think tank.

Make no mistake, marijuana prohibition has failed. We have the opportunity to turn the tide in a direction that will force job creation, increase revenues, and decrease crime, all of which will aid in our resolve to be a more business and retirement friendly state.

That being said, I will close with this: 63% of Connecticut voters support legalization of marijuana for adult use. And a big bulk of written testimony submitted for this hearing today urges the passage of this bill, over half of the testimony.

So please, let's get it right and put Connecticut on a policy-making trajectory that captures much needed social and economic gains. Thank you all for listening and I hope you will consider our testimony when reviewing this bill for final action.

NOTES: CNDP staff transcribed this testimony from the video of the committee hearing, which can be viewed at: <http://ct-n.com/ondemand.asp?ID=13816>

Rep. Ziobron offered the opening statement. The three sponsors then alternated in providing the testimony.