State of Connecticut

SENATE

STATE CAPITOL
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT 06106-1591

SENATOR TONI BOUCHER
TWENTY-SIXTH SENATE DISTRICT

LEGISLATIVE OFFICE BUILDING
ROOM 3701
HARTFORD, CT 06106-1591
CAPITOL: (860) 240-0465
TOLL FREE: (800) 842-1421
FAX: (860) 240-0036
E-mail: Toni.Boucher@cga.ct.gov

ASSISTANT MINORITY LEADER

RANKING MEMBER
TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE
SELECT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN

MEMBER
EDUCATION COMMITTEE
FINANCE, REVENUE AND BONDING COMMITTEE

March 24, 2009

Chairman Andrew McDonald, Chairman Michael Lawlor, Ranking Member John Kissel, Ranking Member Arthur O'Neill and other distinguished Members of the Joint Committee on Judiciary

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in opposition of ***SB 349, An Act Concerning the Penalty for Possession of a Small Amount of Marijuana.***

I became aware of the detrimental impact of marijuana use several years ago after a very emotional and tearful appeal from a mother and father who had found their talented son dead from a drug overdose at home in his bed. Marijuana is a gateway for other drugs, and it was cited by his parents as the real killer of their son. This personal appeal and countless others is the reason I advocate so strongly against the effort to decriminalize marijuana. These narratives about the heinous effects of marijuana are validated by data and conclusions found in numerous research and studies regarding the effects of marijuana.

There is a great deal of research available on the effects of smoked marijuana. In Connecticut alone, Yale University and the University of Connecticut Medical Societies have determined that smoked marijuana causes damages to the brain, heart, immune system, and lungs, as well as impairing learning and memory, and perception and judgment. There is now conclusive evidence that smoking marijuana gives you greater exposure to cancerous chemicals than from tobacco.

Other studies link marijuana use with the loss of motor skills, increase heart rate, and impairing the ability of the body's T- Cell to fight off infections. The drug treatments center of Connecticut site that 60% of their admissions are now for marijuana addiction.

According to the Office of National Drug Control Policy, an extensive analysis of longitudinal studies on marijuana use and risk of mental illness later in life showed that marijuana use increases the risk of developing mental disorders by 40 percent. This same study concludes that marijuana and depression are a dangerous combination: "Weekly or more frequent use of marijuana doubles a teen's risk of depression and anxiety. Depressed teens are more than twice as likely as their peers to abuse or become dependent on marijuana."

SB 349 would erode the progress made over the years to combat marijuana usage, and history proves the detrimental impact of decriminalization. During the 1970s numerous states decriminalized marijuana, and as a result America rose to the highest levels of youth drug use of any civilized nation. Outcry from parent groups overturned these decriminalizing policies and with strong education, enforcement and treatment this trend was reversed. Decades of drug prevention efforts would be undermined by passage

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of this proposal. SB 349 should not use the financially difficult times to justify a proposal that has such damaging health effects.

It is my understanding that the motivation behind this legislation is to save money from the expenses incurred by the law enforcement and judicial system – the thought is that this legislation would decrease the judicial caseload. However, this rationale is not correct. The number of less than one ounce marijuana possession cases is not even close to being significant enough to impact the caseload. The courts will still operate during businesses hours and prosecutors and staff will still have plenty of cases to process. Less than one ounce possession cases are only a small drop in the judicial case backlog. If we put aside for the moment, the fact that marijuana is an illegal narcotic which is chronically abused in our country, and readily available to school aged children. The cost to our health care system, substance abuse treatment centers, mental health centers, and our foster care system would wipe out any previous savings it may potentially generate at first. This bill would still not accomplish the financial savings that the proponents proclaim.

It seems surreal that the same General Assembly who legislatively addresses quality of life and health issues, like trans-fat and second hand smoke, would ever consider a bill that decriminalizes a substance which has such noxious effects. No elected official can ignore the social and health consequences that marijuana use imposes on the people of this country - particularly children who are much more vulnerable to harm and addiction. This bill undermines all the work and effort of drug prevention advocates and would put Connecticut on a path detrimental to the health and well being of its residents.

Thank you for your thoughtful and careful consideration of this proposal and urge you to oppose SB 349.

Sincerely,

Toni

Toni Boucher
State Senator