

Good Morning/Afternoon. First off, I'd like to thank everyone here for giving me the opportunity to speak in front of you today. My name is Elan Wischkin and I am a Graduate Student at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. I am here to testify on behalf of **Senate Bill No. 349, An Act Concerning the Penalty for Possession of a Small Amount of Marijuana**. There are 3 points I would like to share with you today as to why I am in favor of passing Bill 349.

First, Decriminalizing marijuana frees up police resources to deal with more serious crimes. Taxpayers annually spend between \$7.5 billion and \$10 billion arresting and prosecuting individuals for marijuana violations. Almost 90 percent of these arrests are for marijuana possession only.¹ Data reveals that police arrest more Americans per year on marijuana charges than the total number of arrestees for all violent crimes combined, including murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault.² According to a Harvard study, Massachusetts police spend about \$30 million a year on arresting and investigating low-level marijuana users. While there is no similar study in Connecticut, it is clear that some significant resources go into marijuana policing, prosecuting and imprisoning. As posited by the Connecticut Law Review Commission, expenses for arrest and prosecution of marijuana possession offenses have been significantly reduced in states that have passed legislation similar to Bill 349.³

While we know that passing this Bill would greatly bolster Connecticut's floundering budget crisis, there are still some members of the State that believe decriminalizing small amounts of marijuana would lead to social confusion, create enforcement problems for officers and increase the usage of marijuana, especially among people who have never used it before. This leads me into my second and third points of contention.

Not only does decriminalization *not* lead to greater marijuana use, but also strict criminal laws prohibiting marijuana possession do *nothing* to deter marijuana possession. According to Government studies, marijuana decriminalization has had virtually no effect on either marijuana use or beliefs and related attitudes about marijuana among American youth in those states that have enacted such a policy.⁴

In testimony by the Connecticut Law Review Commission, in front of this very Committee, it was affirmed that states and regions that have maintained the strictest criminal penalties for marijuana possession have experienced the largest proportionate increase in use.⁵ In addition, studies show that marijuana laws have no specific deterrent impact on drug taking behavior. Marijuana offenders continue to use marijuana after their conviction at rates equal to those prior to their arrest. There has been no relationship found between the actual or perceived severity of their previous sentence and subsequent use.⁶ Instead, most individuals cite health concerns and family responsibilities rather than legal concerns as their primary reasons for

¹ National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML). 1997. Still Crazy After All These Years: Marijuana Prohibition 1937-1997.

² Federal Bureau of Investigation. 2001. *Uniform Crime Report: Crime in the United States, 2000*.

³ Connecticut Law Review Commission. 1997. Drug Policy in Connecticut and Strategy Options: Report to the Judiciary Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly. State Capitol: Hartford.

⁴ L. Johnson et al. 1981. *Marijuana Decriminalization: The Impact on Youth 1975-1980*. Monitoring the Future, Occasional Paper Series: Paper No. 13. Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan.

⁵ Connecticut Law Review Commission. 1997. Drug Policy in Connecticut and Strategy Options: Report to the Judiciary Committee of the Connecticut Assembly, State Capitol: Hartford.

⁶ P. Erickson. 1980. Cannabis Criminals: The Social Effects of Punishment on Drug Users. Addiction Research Foundation: Toronto.

SB 349: An Act Concerning the Penalty for Possession of a Small Amount of Marijuana

Elan Wischkin, UConn School of Social Work

March 24, 2009

ceasing, or never initiating, marijuana use.⁷ This begs the question then, if marijuana possession and use is not deterred through current regulation and penalties, why do we keep wasting police time and taxpayers' money?

State Representative Mary Fritz of Wallingford warns us that our judicial system is overloaded with cases involving low-level users (i.e. those caught with less than an ounce of marijuana and who are not dealing). It seems that there is a much more sensible and efficient way in handling these sorts of cases and Bill 349 is the answer we have been looking for. Passing this Bill will not only stimulate our flailing economy, but it will also act in accordance with scientific research as opposed to following unrealistic concerns surrounding the Bill's suspect negative effect on our communities.

To conclude, I'd like to thank again the Committee for giving me the time to speak in front of you today. This has been quite a new and unnerving experience for me. I know that moving forward you will do what is best for our State and its citizens. Being born and raised in Connecticut, I have come to admire our ability to perceive paradigm shifts within the nation and then act as pioneers among the states. Whether it be from our stance on Civil Rights back in the day to our position more recently on Gay Rights, a more judicious stance on Marijuana Reform seems to be next in line for this trailblazing state. Thank you again very much for your time.

⁷ National Academy of Sciences, Institute of Medicine (IOM). 1982. Marijuana and Health. National Academy Press: Washington, DC.