

Good Afternoon Rep. Lawlor, Sen. MacDonald and members of the Judiciary Committee,

Thank you for granting us your time and allowing us to voice our testimonies to you.

It took a great deal of consideration as to whether or not I would testify today. As a full time student of University of Connecticut as well as an activist for drug policy reform, I had to decide which was more important: a quiz in German Culture and Civilization or my personal testimony asking you to please support Senate Bill 349 to decriminalize marijuana. My decision was an easy one, although school is my number one priority right now and today's quiz can make or break my grade for this semester, I know that what I stand here doing now is wildly more important. I stand here in defense of every student who has been stripped of their right to higher education because of a marijuana possession conviction. The Aid Elimination Penalty automatically denies financial aid for students with any drug conviction, including misdemeanor marijuana possession. Oddly enough drug convictions are the only infractions for which students are denied financial aid. Murderers, rapists, burglars, arsonists, and other criminals are all eligible to receive aid. Since the penalty was added to the Higher Education Act in 1998, nearly 200,000 students have been denied financial aid because of it. This does not include the countless other students who didn't even apply because they thought they'd be denied. If Bill 349 is passed, the dilemma of the Aid Elimination Penalty will be reduced because students will not be officially convicted of marijuana possession and therefore get to stay in school, while still feeling the penalty of the fine. Putting up roadblocks on the path to education does nothing to solve our nation's drug and crime problems; it only makes them worse. Forcing students convicted of drug charges to drop out of school makes them more likely to continue abusing drugs and engaging in criminal activity (thus becoming costly burdens on the criminal justice system) and less likely to become productive taxpaying citizens (thus reducing the nation's economic productivity and leading to more reliance on costly social programs down the line). We should be working on heightening our education and rehabilitation systems with measures of harm reduction like Bill 349 rather than criminalization and in many unfortunate cases the denial of higher education to the future leaders of America.