

TO: The Honorable Co-Chairs and Ranking Members of the Judiciary Committee

RE: Testimony Regarding House SB 953 An Act Concerning Nonviolent Drug Possession Offenses, SB 1014 An Act Concerning the Penalty for Certain Nonviolent Drug Offenses

FROM: Ginger Katz, CEO and Founder of the Courage To Speak Foundation, Inc.

DATE: March 14, 2011

Testimony

My name is Ginger Katz and I am CEO and Founder of the Courage to Speak Foundation based in Norwalk, CT with drug prevention programs reaching many communities in CT and beyond. Our mission is to empower youth to be drug free and help parents save their children from the dangers of drugs. I am certain that House Bill SB 953 An Act Concerning Nonviolent Drug Possession Offenses, SB 1014 An Act Concerning the Penalty for Certain Nonviolent Drug Offenses, if passed will give children mixed messages about the damages marijuana does to a young person as well as an adults. I respectfully cautioned against easing the consequences for minor drug and alcohol offenses. "When you let someone off the hook, that's when you get in trouble. That's when we lose lives and we harm others," she said. "I know some people think it is about saving money, but what comes first, saving lives or saving money?" I believe leniency in this matter will increase use and in the long run cost Connecticut more money.

I lost my beloved son, Ian, on Sept. 10, 1996. Ian was a college student and athlete. He had a bright future ahead of him, but it turns out he had started using marijuana at the age 14. By the time he was 18, he was using cocaine and, at age 19, heroin. In his sophomore year of college, Ian called up from college crying and begging for help. He was using a drug and couldn't stop. Ian died in his sleep of an overdose. He was only 20 years old. My cries for help to 911 were heard two blocks away.

I know what marijuana does to a growing body. My entire family experiences it firsthand. Please do not underestimate the use of marijuana by giving a clear message with a slap on the wrist and a small fine.

I know hundreds of other mothers who have lost children to drugs, and each of their children started with "a little bit of pot." We have a support group for families in CT and beyond who have lost a child to drugs. I also field many calls from Moms and Dads who have children that are using drugs. They tell me that their children are wreaking havoc on the family. Many of these children are using pot and started their drug use with pot.

It is absolutely imperative to our children's health and well being that we convince you of the huge role marijuana plays in teenage risky behavior. Since Ian's death, my husband and I have developed a community drug prevention education strategy that we have successfully delivered to schools and parent organizations. Our mission is to encourage and inspire youth to be drug free. If these bills are passed, we will have a difficult challenge to convince children that marijuana is unsafe when they get a slap on the wrist or a \$90 fine for possession. We get thousands of emails and letters from children stating that they or their friends smoke marijuana. They say they have a difficult time stopping use and many children go on to other drugs. The CT Governors Partnership handbook says that Connecticut students are using marijuana at a higher rate than students nationally and that 12 to 17 year olds who use marijuana are 85 times more likely to use cocaine; 60% of adolescent who use marijuana before 15 will later use cocaine.

Our organization is dedicated to fulfilling my promise to Ian to do everything in my power to prevent what happened to him from happening to others.

SB 953 makes possession of less than an ounce of marijuana an infraction, punishable by a fine of between \$35 and \$90. SB 1014 makes possession of less than an ounce of pot, and possession of paraphernalia designed to be used with less than an ounce of pot, infractions. I believe this is the first big step in the wrong direction and it sends the wrong message to children.

We have learned many things since Ian's death, and I can assure you that if we become lenient and liberal with our children we will contribute to making our society an unhealthy place for our children to live.

Please consider the children first. Thank you.

GINGER KATZ

CEO and Founder

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