

**Testimony on SB 953 Relating to Marijuana Decriminalization  
To the Judiciary Committee**

**By Lisa Berthiaume, CT Elks Association, State DAP Chairman  
Delivered by Robert Ferone, CT Elks Association, State Government Relations Chairman**

Chairman Eric Coleman, Chairman Gerald Fox, Ranking Member John Kissel, Ranking Member John Hetherington and other distinguished Members of the Judiciary Committee:

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify on this important issue. My name is Lisa Berthiaume and I am the State Drug Awareness Program Chairman for the Connecticut Elks Association, representing 21,000 members in our state.

The Elks Drug Awareness Program is the largest volunteer drug awareness program in the United States. We are very proud of our dedicated army of volunteers who freely give their time and talents to this most noble cause. The Elks are committed to eliminating the use and abuse of illegal drugs by all members of society and believe that in order to ensure a bright future for our country, it is essential that our children be raised in a drug-free environment.

We are very concerned and believe that SB 953, a bill that seeks to decriminalize the possession of up to an ounce of marijuana, will have a substantial negative impact on the state of Connecticut.

According to the *2010 Monitoring the Future Survey (University of Michigan)*, there was a significant increase in daily marijuana use in 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders. The report shows that fewer teens report seeing much danger associated with marijuana use, even daily use. When perceived risk and disapproval rates decline, research illustrates usage rates increase. Decriminalizing marijuana will make it more accessible and available to our youth and undermines successful education and prevention efforts.

Marijuana is not a harmless substance. Someone who smokes marijuana regularly can have many of the same respiratory problems as cigarette smokers. Persistent coughing, bronchitis, and more frequent chest colds are possible symptoms. Regular use of marijuana compromises the ability to learn and to remember information by impairing the ability to focus, sustain, and shift attention. Long term use reduces the ability to organize and integrate complex information. Research increasingly shows that intensive marijuana use often meets the technical requirements for addiction (or dependence). More and more studies are showing addictive qualities in marijuana, and more than 120,000 people in the US each year seek treatment for addiction to it.

By decriminalizing marijuana possession we lose an opportunity for intervention through law enforcement as well as leverage to push a user into treatment. The latest information from the U.S. Treatment Episode Data Set reports that 16.1% of drug treatment admissions were for marijuana as the primary drug of abuse, compared to only 6% in 1992. Allowing for a civil fine penalty for possession of marijuana takes away all efforts at early intervention. Without the involvement of the legal system, assessments and intervention may not be available, potentially trapping our youth in the cycle of addiction, especially for our most disadvantaged who could not afford treatment otherwise.

Decriminalizing up to an ounce of marijuana will make it easier for street corner drug dealers to do business. An insignificant civil fine will just be the cost of doing business for dealers who will learn to carry smaller amounts on them before returning home to stock up and head back out to the streets to continue business.

According to a NIDA-funded study of drug use, students who had used cannabis five or more times in the past year reported problems related to their cannabis use, such as concentration problems, regularly putting themselves in physical danger, and driving after using marijuana.

You don't have to be a drug-abuse expert to understand that to make illicit drug like marijuana relatively "legal" and reduce the risk is likely to lead to increased numbers of drug users as well as increased consumption among current users. Likewise, with increased drug use and consumption, the societal costs associated with drug use and abuse will increase. Instead of repeating the mistakes of neighboring states, perhaps it would be a better use of state resources to increase availability of drug education and prevention efforts.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important issue. This bill does not address the citizens of Connecticut's best interests and sends the wrong message to its youth. Do not be confused -- decriminalization, for all practical purposes, is legalization!

**With Respect,**

**Lisa Berthiaume  
CT Elks Association  
State DAP Chairman**