

**In SUPPORT OF THE FOLLOWING RAISED BILLS:**  
**SB 952 AN ACT CONCERNING THE ENHANCED PENALTY FOR THE SALE OR POSSESSION OF DRUGS NEAR SCHOOLS, DAY CARE CENTERS AND PUBLIC HOUSING PROJECTS and**  
**SB 953 AN ACT CONCERNING NONVIOLENT DRUG POSSESSION OFFENSES**  
**In SUPPORT OF Governor's Bill 1014 AN ACT CONCERNING THE PENALTY FOR CERTAIN NONVIOLENT DRUG OFFENSES**

Dear CT State Legislators:

March 12, 2011

As a public health researcher studying substance use in Greater Hartford, CT for the past 10 years I have seen first hand the harm caused by our current drug policies on individuals and entire communities. The health hazards of marijuana use are not nearly as devastating to people's lives as the punishments we inflict upon those who use marijuana. Not only are these punishments morally and ethically unjust, they are also costing the State of CT and its taxpayers ridiculous sums of money.

National surveys consistently show that over 25% of youth ages 16-20 have tried marijuana, as have over 50% of young adults ages 18-25. Although the majority of marijuana users are white, a higher percentage of arrests for marijuana use are among urban minority youth. A criminal record is especially devastating to a young person's future, especially for youth living in poverty. Under our current policies a youth arrested for marijuana possession is likely to be kicked out of school, denied financial aid for college, and labeled a criminal---causing far greater harm to that young person's future success, than use of the drug itself. And then we wonder why so many of our young people are ending up in jail?

Drug related crimes are not treated equally in suburban and urban areas, nor are Blacks and Latinos given the same consideration when it comes to violating drug laws as whites. When a white youth exchanges marijuana or other drugs with his or her friends, he or she is not labeled a drug dealer. Yet, because of racial and ethnic stereotypes, Black and Latino youth are more likely to be presumed to be drug dealers than their white counterparts when caught with the same quantity of drugs. During my research, each time I interviewed a white young adult who heavily used drugs and was involved in the drug trade, I was told stories about how they were let off the hook many times by authorities. One young student noted the fact that the only time he got in more serious trouble with the law was when a Black friend was in the car with him. While these were anecdotal reports, statistics show that African Americans account for 39 percent of people within the criminal justice system, even though they comprise only 13 percent of the U.S. population (Vera Institute).

Rates of incarceration for Blacks and Latinos in CT are also disproportionately high due to the drug free zone laws, another policy that disproportionately impacts urban minority youth in CT and leads to harsher sentencing for marijuana possession/dealing in urban areas. I personally witnessed the devastating effect this law has had on a co-worker son who was arrested for possession of several bags of marijuana in Weaver High School and threatened with mandatory minimum charges for drug dealing within a school zone, though he claimed he had bought the three bags of weed for his friends to celebrate together on the upcoming holiday weekend. He landed up nearly expelled from school (he withdrew instead due to his father and his teacher's advocacy on his behalf) and yet still ended up having to spend several months in a detention facility and lost more than half of his junior year.

Opponents of the decriminalization of drug possession fear that it will result in increased usage among youth. But comparisons of national drug policy have shown that places such as Portugal, England and Wales, and those states in U.S. which have decriminalized and reduced the punishments for marijuana use, have not seen spikes in use or related harms. In fact, since the reduction of enforcement of marijuana laws in England, there has been a reduction in marijuana use. This is also true in Western Australia and Portugal. As the research of Alex Stevens, Professor in Criminal Justice, at University of Kent, demonstrates: "the evidence suggests that we could relax the enforcement, and certainly the penal oppression that goes with the enforcement that goes with those laws, without risking a major increase in drug use." (Vera Institute "Does Drug Policy Matter?" podcast, 1, 25, 2011).

In 2009, the OLR estimated state savings of \$11 million from not prosecuting minor marijuana possession. 13 other states, including New York, Massachusetts and California, have decriminalized first-time, personal consumption of marijuana. Let our lawmakers in CT join these states in implementing a more sensible

drug policy. Let our law enforcement officers focus their valuable time, efforts and resources on individuals who commit violent crimes, instead of wasting it on individuals charged with marijuana possession.

Let us put an end to our failed drug policies that are causing untold harm to young people's lives, destroying families and communities, and burdening our government with an overblown criminal justice system. These current policies are doing more harm than good and are decreasing the overall health and public safety of citizens of our State. More funding is needed instead for drug prevention and treatment and for helping create living wage jobs—efforts to help benefit people's lives rather than punishing them for the use of drugs.

Sincerely,

Sarah Diamond, Ph.D.  
Clean Slate Committee-Hartford  
Diamond Research Consulting, LLC  
West Hartford, CT