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Judiciary Committee Testimony in FAVOR of HB 5389

Thank you Chairman Coleman and Chairman Fox, Vice Chairs, Ranking Members and Members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Erik Williams. I am a resident of Coventry, Connecticut and the volunteer Executive Director of the Connecticut Chapter of NORML, the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws. NORML is the nation's oldest and largest marijuana reform organization in the United States with thousands of Connecticut members.

I am here today to testify in favor of HB 5389, An Act Concerning the Palliative Use of Marijuana. We support medical marijuana as do the vast majority of Connecticut residents - almost 80% - spanning all ages, races, religions, and political persuasions.

They, and we, support this legislation because it is the right, humane and compassionate thing to do. The medicinal benefits of cannabis, whether ingested, taken as a tincture in drop or spray form, vaporized, smoked or used as a topical cream have helped millions legally across the country and thousands of seriously ill Connecticut citizens illegally.

We at Connecticut NORML support allowing doctors and patients to make the best decisions together and with all available options. Safe, legal access to medicine is all patients, their family and friends are asking.

While I personally do not have a need for medicinal marijuana as defined in this bill, I and so many others are supporting it because the time to try to legalize the medicine one needs is not after a diagnosis. My family dies of cancer and should I, my wife or my children ever get it, I want all options to be on the table.

I will not testify today as to the medicinal benefits of marijuana today as I am sure you will hear many stories directly from patients, doctors and their caregivers. You will hear of horrible suffering from a number of illnesses, inflections and ailments and the effective ways in which medicinal marijuana has helped your fellow citizens, your friends, neighbors or even your own family. I know this because I have been told hundreds of these stories from all walks of Connecticut life and I am not embarrassed to say that some of these heartbreaking stories have moved me to tears. Too many of your fellow citizens, your constituents, are suffering enough without having to suffer the indignity of being called criminals in their times of crisis.

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I do, however, want to address a few issues NORML has with HB 5389 and solutions which we feel will make this fantastic bill even better. But before I do, I want to thank and commend the hard work and diligence of the Judiciary Committee Chairman and members who have worked to craft this bill.

Pharmacist Language

We applaud what is being attempted here with the pharmacist language, but do not feel it is being achieved. We support having a licensed pharmacist either on-site at dispensaries during all operating hours, on-site for limited hours or available on-call to patients. While this is important and beneficial to patients, but making licensing available only to pharmacists is not the way to go. You should open the opportunity to any Connecticut resident or Connecticut company with the pharmacist on-site being mandated. There are other pitfalls to having a dispensary within a pharmacy that would invite scrutiny of the federal government that could shut down the program.

Manufacturer

We see a need to define "Manufacturer" along with "dispensary" and "licensed producer." This should be a separate licensing procedure because of the need for more plant material to produce the non-psychoactive products like creams and topicals as well as the food products, tinctures, etc. and its distinctive nature. Smoking medicine is neither the preferred nor best method of delivery for most patients. Making tinctures, creams, edibles and topicals with clear dosage and standardization available will help make this program successful. Most patients, especially seniors, do not want to get "high," they just want the medicinal benefits. That can best be achieved through alternative delivery methods.

Keeping it in Connecticut

"A Connecticut company or resident" We firmly believe that all definitions should include this language to allow for greater control and oversight by the State. It also will have a stronger state economic benefit and guard against unscrupulous license-seekers who do not have the patients' best interests in mind. This is also another safeguard against federal intervention into the medical cannabis program.

Thank you for your time, for delving into such detail in this bill before you and for crafting what is widely seen as the best piece of medical marijuana legislation in the nation - truly model legislation. We ask you to please support HB 5389 for all the patients who truly need it right now.

I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.