Good morning Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, Senator Kissel, Representative Rebimbash and members of the Judiciary Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to express my support for Senate Bill 16, An Act Concerning the Adult Use of Cannabis. I want to thank the Governor and the Committee for taking on this important issue.

In 1920, our nation began what President Herbert Hoover called a “great social and economic experiment, noble in motive and far-reaching in purpose” — the prohibition of alcohol sales. While alcohol consumption under prohibition initially dropped, it soon began to steadily increase, and the "noble experiment" created many new problems. The government had no control over production or sales, and an average of one thousand Americans died each year from tainted alcohol. Meanwhile, violent criminal organizations took control of the industry. Corruption became rampant in law enforcement, and the federal government was deprived of more than $11 billion in tax revenue.

After 13 years, the noble experiment was abandoned in favor of regulation and taxation of alcohol.

Following the end of Prohibition, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, under controversial commissioner Harry J. Anslinger, engaged in a sensationalist, racially charged anti-cannabis campaign. This campaign culminated in the Marijuana Tax Act of 1937, which outlawed the possession or sale of cannabis. Similar tactics continued into the 1970s during Richard Nixon’s “war on drugs.” In a 1994 interview published in 2016, Nixon advisor and key Watergate figure John Ehrlichman said the war on drugs was created as a political tool to fight African-Americans and anti-war advocates. Ehrlichman said “We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.”
Cannabis prohibition has lasted 80 years. Yet, it has been just as much of a failure as America’s short-lived experiment with alcohol prohibition. It is time we take the rational, common-sense approach to cannabis as we did with alcohol.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, on average for 2017 and 2018, there were an estimated 439,000 Connecticut residents who used cannabis annually — over 12% of the state’s population. If these users are getting this product from the illicit market, that poses significant dangers. Buyers can be sold cannabis tainted with harmful contaminants or offered hard drugs. If this bill is enacted, consumers could purchase products from regulated stores. Cannabis would be produced by regulated growers and product manufacturers and would be tested for potency and contaminants.

Another significant argument in favor of legalization is, as was the case with alcohol in the 1920s, prohibition breeds violence. Since drug-related disputes can’t be resolved lawfully, violent conflict becomes inevitable. In a regulated system, cannabis will be produced and sold by legitimate, taxpaying businesses instead of drug cartels and criminals. Legalization would also displace the illicit market for cannabis. As of September 2017, Colorado officials estimate that more than 70% of cannabis purchases were made on the regulated market. And the L.A. Times reported “Widespread legalization in the U.S. is killing Mexico’s marijuana business, and cartel leaders know it.” In fact, seizures at U.S. ports of entry have plummeted from 2.4 million pounds in 2013 to 861,231 pounds in 2018.”

I am also pleased to see that this bill includes significant provisions to facilitate the erasure of criminal records for individuals previously convicted of conduct made legal by the bill. This is an absolutely critical issue for communities in which have been disproportionately harmed by strict enforcement of drug laws. No person’s future should be compromised for conduct that the majority of the population thinks should be legal.

Legalization can also help Connecticut’s economy. Cannabis businesses retain workers and utilize services from a wide variety of collateral sectors, including construction, engineering, security, legal, insurance and real estate. An economic analysis of the legal cannabis industry in Colorado found that it generated $2.4 billion in overall economic activity in 2015.

And we know there is popular support for legalization here in Connecticut. An October 2017 poll by Sacred Heart University shows that 71% of Connecticut residents support legalizing cannabis. Furthermore, our region is rapidly moving toward regulating cannabis. Nationwide, an October 2018 Gallup poll found 66% of Americans support making cannabis use legal for adults. We know all too well that retail sales north of our border in Massachusetts have already begun, with several other states in the region ready to follow suit. We need to ensure that Connecticut does not become an island of prohibition as our neighbors move forward with common sense cannabis policy.