

Written Testimony Supporting Governor's Bill No. 1014 An Act Concerning the Penalty for Certain Nonviolent Drug Offenses

Good afternoon Senator Coleman, Representative Fox and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Sandra Staub. As the Legal Director for the ACLU of Connecticut, I am here to support Governor's Bill No. 1014, An Act Concerning the Penalty for Certain Nonviolent Drug Offenses.

Our organization has long supported fair and practical law reform measures that mitigate the enormous civil liberties losses suffered by civic institutions, the legal system, and families across the state.

This legislation, making the possession of a small amount of marijuana a civil infraction, is a significant step toward rational drug policy for the state. This approach would remove many criminal cases from the prosecutorial apparatus and make prisons less crowded. Furthermore, this bill would conserve important societal resources, including law enforcement, legal, and court costs and free the police to focus on keeping us safe.

Marijuana arrests effectively introduce thousands of people into the criminal justice system who might otherwise never come into contact with it. Studies have shown that young men of color in particular are profiled for prosecution under criminal marijuana statutes.

Connecticut currently has harsh penalties for possession of small amounts of marijuana by adults with first-time possession of small amounts of marijuana (less than four ounces) punishable by up to 1 year in prison and a \$1,000 dollar fine. Subsequent convictions can result in imprisonment of up to 5 years and up to \$3,000 in fines and are felonies.

Alaska, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Oregon have all decriminalized possession of small amounts of marijuana. In these many states that already treat small marijuana infractions as proposed by this bill, there is no basis to conclude that marijuana use, marijuana-related crime, or juvenile use have increased.

When you consider the harshness of the current penalties with the disproportionate application of the law to people of color and the fact that there is no public safety justification for imposition of harsh penalties, decriminalization becomes critical to protect civil rights as well as a civil liberties.

People arrested for marijuana possession are fingerprinted and photographed, and often questioned without the presence of a lawyer. These

arrests can create permanent criminal justice records which can limit employment, bar access to financial aid, and cause loss of housing. Many people have trouble getting jobs because of criminal records related to minor marijuana charges. If this bill passes, the people targeted or profiled under the old law will not be forever haunted by an indiscretion in their past.

The ACLU of Connecticut welcomes the opportunity to express our continued support for this bill and respectfully requests that this Committee work for its passage this session.