

Vermont Legislature: Testimony of Bill Coleman for House Appropriations Committee—3/31/2016

I'm Bill Coleman and I've lived in Vermont since the mid 1970s. I'm a mental health counselor also working in the field of addiction. I have personal knowledge of addiction as well, being in recovery from very heavy daily alcohol and marijuana use that entirely ceased over 23 years ago. Since that time I have earned two Masters degrees. People who speak of lives being ruined or of permanent brain cell loss due to marijuana use are not serving the purposes of honest discussion with alarmist rhetoric of that sort. Brain cells are constantly dying and being replaced by new ones. We have learned that the human brain can be very resilient and dynamic. Although there are people who have experienced considerable challenges in life possibly partly as a result of marijuana use, this is no different from other drugs that are already legal. Recovery from psychological addiction to marijuana can be very robust, and often much more so than recovery from alcohol addiction or even from tobacco addiction. Often I have worked extensively with clients who had been receiving various psychiatric medications for extended periods of time only to find that they were unable to completely discontinue using them without dramatic declines and

instability. Such clients find themselves stuck in between a rock and a hard place, with ongoing use of their medications producing side effects that for them are unbearable, while cessation of such legally prescribed drugs becomes either unachievable or unimaginable.

Because marijuana is non-toxic it has some very different qualities to its use whether it is used medically or simply quote recreationally, unquote. As a non-toxic drug its' heavy use can tend to coat receptor cells in the brain, giving the appearance of cognitive declines that disappear in time when use of the marijuana is discontinued. This compares very favorably with the effects of alcohol, which is a toxin. It is alcohol which produces both innumerable people suffering from the "wet brain" clusters of symptoms, or millions whose lives become severely limited before they even begin by fetal alcohol syndrome.

When widely agreed upon data pertaining to death rates from legal alcohol and tobacco and currently illegal marijuana are examined an oddly inverse relationship is very noticeable. It is the legally available drugs; alcohol and tobacco, that every year inflict massive numbers of fatalities. 100,000 Americans die from alcohol and 400,000 Americans die from tobacco every year. Yet we are in this chamber not discussing how to crack down on tobacco or alcohol, but to decide whether to

legalize marijuana, a drug that (again) is non-toxic and kills almost no one.

Working with young people or other clients over the years this peculiar discrepancy between our laws and the lethality of various legal and illegal drugs is something that is plainly obvious to a great many of them. This hypocrisy in fact is often a huge impediment to successful prevention of addiction through drug education. Young people are observant, intelligent and sensible and a great many notice what seems to many like a glaringly dishonest bias in favor of deadly alcohol and tobacco, while they must break the law if they decide to use some marijuana.

We need to face the fact that drug education must have an air of truthfulness to it in order for our young people to accept it as accurate. We must also reluctantly accept that whether or not marijuana or other drugs are legal does not usually result in these same young people deciding not to try something like marijuana if they see their friends using it. Any adverse effects of youthful marijuana use may not be evident to them for many years if they choose to continue to use it. By then they may very likely have decided that they were being lied to about marijuana and that drug education about heroin is probably

dishonest as well. We are all too aware that it may only take days for the effects of opiate use to result in addiction, rapidly making sadly evident all of the suffering, loss of self respect and the many other harmful effects of drug seeking behaviors. Seemingly in no time at all our addicted youths are propelled into selling heroin, selling their bodies to obtain heroin, or committing property crimes in desperate efforts to maintain their very expensive addictions, losing sight of everything else that ever meant anything to them in the process.

By providing for regulated sales of marijuana as S. 241 will allow, obviously only adults will be able to purchase marijuana. But the message legal marijuana sales will send to youth is actually a very sound one—that marijuana can be obtained legally by adults, while opiates or other far more dangerous drugs must be purchased from drug dealers. This is actually just the message that our government needs to be sending out. Not many besides advertisers will try to claim that alcohol or tobacco are desirable for people to use. But their use continues regardless, as will marijuana use. Nearly 80 years of marijuana prohibition in this state have done nothing to stop marijuana from having become so widely used.

What is needed is for marijuana sales to take place in a regulated

market, where products free of adulterants such as PCP, formaldehyde or other very dangerous contaminants will not be present without strict accountability and legal ramifications for producers. As a teen I was not so fortunate, and experienced a time period when the US government had sprayed paraquat from the air all over the Mexican marijuana that my friends and I were smoking every day.

It is long past time for adults to have the option of purchasing personal use quantities of pure cannabis produced under safe and hygienic conditions. Continuation of existing criminalization of marijuana merely serves to support the interests of the drug cartels and the criminal enterprises that have profited from marijuana prohibition for so many decades.

The tax money that will be generated from legal marijuana sales should be dedicated to drug treatment and addiction prevention programs; not to provide additional funds for law enforcement. Of course due to the hysteria associated with the many decades of propaganda directed against marijuana we find ourselves in a parliamentary process that involves more compromises than should be necessary with scientific realities. We must pass S. 241 without further fears about every last detail. Marijuana legalization will be an

unqualified success that will gradually put to rest the unfounded fear-based opposition, dispel the prejudices that have been at the roots of prohibition, and lead to brighter days both for freedom in this state and for stigma-free paths towards successful treatment and recovery for Vermonters who may experience problems with drugs, whether they be drugs that are currently legal or illegal.