



*Laura Subin, Esq., director, Vermont Coalition to Regulate Marijuana  
House Human Services Committee Testimony  
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My name is Laura Subin and I am the Director of the Vermont Coalition to Regulate Marijuana (the Coalition). I am an attorney and I work as a consultant to non-profit organizations primarily in Vermont but also nationally and internationally. I spent decades working in the anti-domestic violence field. I directed Steps to End Domestic Violence (formerly Women Helping Battered Women) and the Vermont Council on Domestic Violence. I continue to testify in Vermont family and criminal courts as a domestic violence expert. In the course of this aspect of my work I developed a specialization in the frequently co-occurring crises of domestic violence and substance abuse in families. This experience is part of what has led me to become an advocate in favor of marijuana policy reform.

***The Vermont Coalition to Regulate Marijuana***

The Coalition that I am currently directing was convened in 2014. We are a group of individuals and organizations that believe that marijuana prohibition is a failed policy that should be replaced. Prominent members of our coalition include Governor Madeline Kunin, former Attorney General Kim Cheney, Former Executive Director of the Vermont Human Rights Commission and Former Defender General Robert Appel, and environmentalist Bill McKibben. Organizational members include the ACLU of Vermont, Vermonter's for Criminal Justice Reform and the Vermont Cancer Survivor's Network. The Coalition includes other leaders and practitioners from across professional sectors. Most relevant to this Committee at present, we count numerous medical and mental health professionals among our members including doctors, substance abuse treatment providers, prevention experts and school based councilors.

Presently we have well over a thousand members. Thousands of additional Vermonters have signed up to receive updates and information from our Coalition. I think the difference between those numbers is significant. Through the extensive anecdotal information we have gathered it has become clear that many individuals who want marijuana legalized do not feel at liberty to say so publicly. These individuals include police officers, doctors, state employees and others who are

affiliated with professional associations or subject to organizational hierarchies that oppose marijuana legalization. They face the very real possibility of personal and professional ramifications for standing up in favor of marijuana policy reform. Sadly this results in a public dialogue on this issue that is undermined by a culture of stigma and fear.

The Coalition supports H.170. By eliminating civil penalties for an ounce or less of marijuana and reducing penalties incrementally for larger amounts, H.170 takes the next logical step from Vermont's 2013 decriminalization law, legislation that is widely viewed as successful reform.

### ***Youth use of marijuana in Vermont***

It is my understanding that this committee is focusing primarily on the issue of youth use of marijuana and how that might be impacted by H.170. Members of the Coalition I represent are also deeply concerned about high youth use rates in Vermont. We do not, however, believe that continuing to punish adults for making the safer choice than consuming alcohol is the right approach to addressing this problem. A growing body of evidence supports our point of view.

As you heard in testimony last week, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) is widely accepted as the best source of information regarding youth marijuana use in Vermont and around the country. In February Deputy Commissioner Barbara Cimaglio testified before the House Judiciary Committee that, according to the 2015 YRBS, teen use of marijuana was down slightly in the decade between 2005-2015. The most significant decrease occurred in the years 2013-2015. This period coincides with the modest liberalization of Vermont's marijuana policy that began with a medical marijuana law in 2004 and was followed by decriminalization of an ounce or less in 2013.

These numbers are encouraging. They counter the unsubstantiated assumption of some opponents that additional, modest reforms to Vermont's criminal law regarding adult use of marijuana — reforms that will make Vermont's marijuana laws fairer and reduce their disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable Vermont adults—would lead to increased use of marijuana by Vermont's young people.

### ***Teen use rates in states that have legalized***

It is even more reassuring that Vermont's experience is consistent with those of other states around the country that have moved towards more liberal marijuana laws. Studies continue to confirm that changing laws regarding adult use do not cause rates of youth marijuana use to increase. For example, in June 2016, a study published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* found that the number of teens using marijuana — and the number with problematic use — is falling as more states legalize or decriminalize cannabis. The findings were based on a survey of more than 200,000 youth in all 50 states. Similarly, in its statement supporting decriminalization, the American Academy of

Pediatrics noted: “Decriminalization of recreational use of marijuana by adults has not led to an increase in youth use rates of recreational marijuana.”

As of December 2016, available data suggests that legalizing and regulating marijuana for adult use has not significantly impacted teen marijuana use either. The most in-depth state surveys suggest modest decreases in rates of youth marijuana use in Colorado and Washington, both of which approved initiatives to regulate marijuana like alcohol in 2012. Washington D.C., a legalization only jurisdiction, has seen a similar small reduction in youth use rates since adopting that policy.

Studies of the impact of medical marijuana laws — many of them allowing for medical marijuana programs much broader than Vermont’s — provide longer time periods for data collection and lead to the same conclusions. A 2015 national study covering 24 years of data published in *The Lancet* found that medical marijuana laws do not lead to an increase in teen marijuana use. According to the lead researcher of the study, Dr. Deborah Hasin, the findings provided, “the strongest evidence to date that marijuana use by teenagers does not increase after a state legalizes medical marijuana.”

These trends are clear in spite of the reduced perception of harm you heard about in testimony last week. While that perception has been trending downwards for decades, there has not been a corresponding increase in use. It seems to me that the two patterns ought to be considered in conjunction with one another. When they are there is considerable reason for optimism that public policies that accurately reflect the relative harm of marijuana to other legal and illegal substances do not negatively impact youth use.

### ***Honest education provides critical support to parents***

While the evidence does not support delaying critical criminal justice reforms because of unsubstantiated fears about youth marijuana use, concerns about teen use of all drugs and alcohol should continue to be a priority. You heard testimony last week about some of the prevention programming available through the Department of Health. The numbers seem to indicate that those programs are meeting with some success. It was also clear from the testimony that youth prevention resources are limited and funding concerns are very real. Fortunately, the Department of Health and other providers, also offer relatively cost neutral resources to what the DOH has identified as the “#1 influence on adolescent substance use” — Parents.

I believe that you have already been referred to the [ParentUp](#) website, a resource created by the Vermont DOH that is designed to help parents address substance use with their kids. According to Deputy Commissioner Cimaglio, that website was updated in 2016, to include additional information about marijuana requested by parents. It is my hope that the robust public discourse about legalization that has

been taking place around the state may have been part of the motivation behind parents taking the positive step of seeking more information.

Similar initiatives are underway in other states, including those that have legalized marijuana. A few of these include: [Drug Free Youth DC](#) , [Learn About Marijuana](#) created by the University of Washington and [Good to Know](#) from the Colorado Department of Health. These types of easily accessible resources for parents are an important part of the pathway forward.

Of course, their utility is limited by the quality of their content. Parent and youth education websites can and should continue to be improved based on well-rounded research and emerging best practices in the field. Most teenagers have a data source in their back pockets and can fact check in real time. They also have their own personal experiences and they know when they are not being told the truth. Trying to scare teenagers into abstinence is a decades old approach. It is not fair and it does not work. Instead, it erodes their trust and makes those who are most at risk least likely to turn to the adults that are supposed to be there to help them. Discussions, resources and interventions regarding marijuana use for parents and kids alike should be honest and evidence based. They should not focus on marijuana alone. Instead the harms associated with marijuana use should be presented in context and discussed in relation to much more harmful substances including opiates, alcohol and tobacco.

I have three children in Vermont's public elementary and middle schools. I believe that marijuana prohibition and the historical rhetoric that has accompanied it is failing them. I am deeply concerned that should my children reach their teenage years without Vermont having moved forward with sensible policy reforms the systems designed to help them navigate the challenges ahead will perpetuate this failure. Instead, I want lawmakers to seize this historic opportunity. I want my children to be able to have increasing respect for Vermont's public policies as they become fairer and more consistent. At the same time, I hope that they will have access to the best possible education about substances and, should they ever need them, intervention resources that will help them make smarter, safer, healthier choices. H.170 is an important step towards achieving those goals.