

STATEMENT OF BERNARD BARRIERE

Madame Chairperson, distinguished members of the House Committee on Human Services. My name is Bernie Barriere. I am a native, and life-long resident of Bennington and the President and Chief Technical Officer of Vermont Green Grow.

I applaud the State legislature for taking the lead in making Vermont a medical marijuana-friendly state and allowing Vermonters to treat the symptoms of their medical conditions with marijuana. While Vermont has done the right thing in this regard, we believe the Legislature can do more for Vermonters by providing access to medical marijuana dispensaries in high population areas of the state that are currently lacking a dispensary.

I am here today to urge this Committee to approve S.16 that includes additional medical conditions, including PTSD, that afflicted Vermonters suffer from that can be treated with medical marijuana for symptom relief, and increase the number of dispensary and grow licenses from the current number of four licenses to eight.

The number of patients on the Vermont medical registry would be much higher if there were more allowable illnesses on the approved medical condition list, similar to what have been approved in many other states. Unfortunately, many Individuals who could register, but live more than two hours from a dispensary, are not registering, and instead are continuing to buy their marijuana on the black market, for a lower price than currently charged by the existing dispensaries, and all too often a better quality than what is being sold by the existing dispensaries.

In 2014, the state legislature authorized a report to be completed regarding marijuana legalization and regulation options in Vermont. On January 16, 2015, researchers from the *Rand Corporation* presented their in-depth report. The report revealed that approximately 80,000 Vermonters are regular marijuana users, consuming over 20 metric tons of marijuana annually. It was estimated that Vermonters spend approximately \$175 million dollars each year buying marijuana from illegal sources.

Presently, only four licensed dispensaries are authorized in the entire state.

I, like many others, are uncertain why two of those four licensed dispensaries are owned by the same person.

One of the licensed dispensaries recently had an issue with two of their key employees, their head grower and office manager, being arrested for drug offenses, yet that dispensary has been allowed to keep their license and stay open. The third dispensary is engaging in improper and potentially harmful growing practices.

The four dispensaries currently operating are in Montpelier, Brattleboro, Burlington and Brandon. We believe there is a need for more dispensaries here in Vermont to adequately meet the needs of Vermonters in areas of the state currently lacking a dispensary. Bennington, with a population of approximately 16,000, is over a two (2) hour drive from the closest dispensary, which, of course, is much longer and dangerous in the winter time. The Northeast Kingdom comprises Essex, Orleans, and Caledonia Counties, with a combined population of approximately 65,000 people. The closest dispensary for many of the residents in the Northeast Kingdom is over a two (2) hour drive, which like Bennington, is even much longer and dangerous in the winter time.

You heard testimony from Alex Ford that Rhode Island has authorized only three dispensaries for approximately 16,400 registered patients, though Ms. Ford misstated that number at 18,000 registered patients.

Ms. Ford argued that having only four dispensaries in Vermont should more than suffice for the approximate 3,400 registered Vermont patients. Unfortunately, Ms. Ford left out some key additional facts. It is not reasonable to try to compare Vermont to Rhode Island. Rhode Island is a much smaller state, 1,214 square miles. Because it is a small state, Rhode Island residents do not have to travel very far to find a dispensary. The furthest distance a Rhode Island resident has to drive is less than 40 miles and under one hour to get to their closest dispensary. Unlike Vermonters, residents of Rhode Island do not have to drive over snow and ice covered mountain roads. Vermont, at 9,614 square miles, is approximately nine times larger than Rhode Island, and we have many more dirt roads and mountains that take hours upon hours to traverse. Rhode Island has over 700 physicians who are certified to write prescriptions for medical marijuana. And, Rhode Island is currently looking at either expanding the number of licensed Compassion Centers or pass legislation legalizing marijuana for adult recreational use.

Many who need medical marijuana are not physically or financially able to drive long distances. The fact that sick people are forced to make two hour trips each way to get to a dispensary is indeed a heavy, and often insurmountable burden.

You have heard testimony from Alex Ford, that she and Shayne Lynn offer delivery services. Unfortunately, those services are for a fee that is added to what is already one of the highest prices for medical marijuana in the country. You have heard testimony that approximately 80% of registered patients are considered to be low income. It is unimaginable that these same limited income individuals have to pay such high costs just for symptom relief. We have all heard too often that many ill individuals have to make a daily decision of whether to pay for groceries and fuel oil for heat, or pay for their daily medication just to be able to function each day.

You have heard from Shayne Lynn and Alex Ford that because of economies of scale they have no choice but to charge such high prices. Yet, they both complain they are in debt for up to \$ 1 million dollars. They have argued that the only way they can have any opportunity to be profitable is to allow them to open satellite dispensaries, with no geographic restrictions. We are opposed to the notion that current license holders will adequately and fairly assist the underserved patients and underserved geographic areas.

Alex Ford has stated she wants the opportunity to open a satellite dispensary in Burlington to directly compete with Shayne Lynn.

Shayne Lynn has stated he wants to open a dispensary in Rutland to directly compete with Alex Ford. No current license holder has stated they would open a full-time satellite location in Bennington or the Northeast Kingdom. To the contrary, they have stated it would not be profitable for them to open a dispensary in those locations. A statement like that puts profits ahead of what should be the true intent of our State's medical marijuana program, help those sick patients who are in desperate need of symptom relief wherever they may live in our state. The current license holders, Shayne Lynn, Alex Ford and Monique McHenry all testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee and made the same arguments you have heard from them for satellite dispensaries. The Senate Judiciary Committee unanimously rejected the notion of satellites and instead unanimously supported S.16's increase of four (4) additional dispensaries.

Presently, at over \$370 per ounce, Vermonters are paying some of the highest prices in the country for marijuana. Increasing the number of dispensaries would result in more competition amongst the existing dispensaries, thereby resulting in better quality product and more competitive pricing.

As is true with any commodity market, increased competition should drive down the cost of medical marijuana.

As I stated, the price of medical marijuana in Vermont is amongst the highest in the United States. Why should a Vermonter, who earns only a fraction of the income earned by a resident of Silicon Valley, California, have to pay considerably more for medical marijuana than that California resident?

By allowing satellite locations rather than issuing more licenses, there would be no incentive for the current license holders to improve the quality of their current product, or offer better pricing. They would simply offer their same product at the same high prices in multiple locations. The three licensed holders insist they must maintain control of the supply of marijuana. That is precisely what they have done for the past four years and the only tangible results have been claims of excessive debt, the production of an inferior product, inadequate testing, and prohibitive pricing. Presently, Vermonters are more likely to either cross state lines to get their marijuana at a lower price and better quality, or continue to purchase unregulated marijuana on the thriving black market. We need to open up more competition here in Vermont to better control quality and pricing, and stem black market trading.

An additional benefit that should not be overlooked is an increase in the number of grow/dispensing facilities in the state will result in much needed added employment to the regions mentioned and additional revenue to the state.

I want to leave you with a quote I recently read from a 79-year old woman who uses medical marijuana on a daily basis for her glaucoma, scoliosis, stenosis, and herniated disks: “Seniors don’t want to get high; they want to get well.”

Thank you for your time and we are pleased to answer whatever questions you may have.

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Vermont Green Grow
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