

February 15, 2017

WRITTEN NOTES OF CHIEF GEORGE MERKEL (VERGENNES POLICE) ON BEHALF OF THE VERMONT POLICE ASSOCIATION (VPA) REGARDING H. 167

H. 167

I won't repeat the testimony offered by Major Hall and Det. Warren last week except to state:

- For recreational users our ability to leverage cooperation through a charge or ability to arrest and detain through Rule 3 (felony versus misdemeanor) is not about gaining a conviction because these tend to be very provable.
- For us leverage is mostly about getting them away from a drug that can be and often is fatal and closer to recovery and us closer to the source of the distribution.
- Law Enforcement in VT is seeking out creative ways to help these folks find recovery such as Project Safe Catch or partnering with substance abuse interventionists upon arrest.

I understand that the goal is to assist people addicted to heroin and cocaine in their rehabilitation by supporting their recovery –the thinking being that these folks will be better able to find jobs if they don't have a felony conviction.

I am not privy to the statistics or facts you may have that demonstrates that these folks would have otherwise secured a particular job if the conviction was for a misdemeanor heroin possession and not a felony possession.

Opiates

The opiate crisis is real and extensive and affects our entire community.

The VPA supports the eradication of the use of opiates and other harmful drugs in our Vermont communities and the recovery efforts that brings addicted people into full recovery.

The VPA notes that whether or not H. 167 *measurably* and *demonstrably* helps people recover, it seems to only nibble around the margins.

The VPA strongly encourages this committee to think larger and more comprehensively by converting H. 167 into a statewide WORKING GROUP that would report its findings and recommendations back to you.

We encourage you to form a work group that includes people on the front line who truly understand these issues and who work with or have been part of this community. We recommend that the work group include:

- Recovering Addicts
- Substance Abuse Providers
- Representatives of Families affected by the disease of addiction
- Representatives of the Designated Agencies,
- Representatives of local and state police and sheriffs, county and state prosecutors, local and state defense attorneys, and the members of the judicial branch

- Representatives of local government such as the League of Cities and Towns, affected municipalities in rural and urban Vermont
- Representatives of State Agencies such as DCF, DOC, DOH, DOL
- Representatives of the State Housing Authority and local or private housing organizations, and housing developers
- Representatives of the medical and mental health community including Green Mountain Care Board, hospitals, primary and pediatric care doctors
- Representatives of the primary health insurers in this state
- Representatives of the business community such as the DOL, local and state chambers of commerce, vocational groups, and business leaders
- Representatives of the education community such as high schools, to include school counselors, AOE, community colleges, colleges
- A facilitator would be helpful—Champlain College Center for Appreciative Inquiry may be a source for this facilitator.

Our substitute proposal is to create a large working group charged with addressing this QUESTION:

How might the State of Vermont in partnership with our communities and community partners:

- Prevent, Deter Use and Distribution of Heroin/ Opiates and Cocaine
- Support Addicts by better connecting them to recovery services
- Support Addicts in sustaining their Recovery.

Within this broad question lies several subdiscussions around:

- treatment
- education
- employment
- housing
- criminal justice

We should take a 360 degree, bottom to the top, integrated and holistic look at this issue with the folks who experienced it first hand and therefore truly understand it, and partner them with the folks have the resources and decision making authority to offer a way forwa