

STATEMENT OF BERNARD BARRIERE

Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary. My name is Bernie Barriere. I am a native, and life-long resident of Bennington.

I went to high school at Mount Anthony Union High School in Bennington, where I was a high school All American and the State wrestling champion in my weight class. I attended Hofstra University on a full wrestling scholarship. For the past 25 years, I have been involved in corporate security and executive protection, serving as Chief of Security for internationally recognized music and entertainment individuals.

I applaud the State legislature for taking the lead in making Vermont a medical marijuana-friendly state and allowing Vermonters to treat 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 the Legislature to consider increasing the number of dispensary and grow licenses from the current number of four licenses to eight.

In 2011, the state authorized licenses for up to four dispensaries to legally grow marijuana and dispense to patients who were pre-registered on the state medical marijuana registry. In 2013, the first permitted dispensary opened. At that time, approximately 800 Vermont residents were listed on the state registry. By the end of 2013, the total number of Vermonters on the state registry more than doubled and grew to approximately 1,800 patients. By March of 2016 the registry grew to 2,542. Those numbers would be much higher if there were more strategically located dispensaries. Individuals who could register but live more than 2 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.

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.

My purpose here today is not to urge you to legalize marijuana for recreational use in Vermont. Rather, I am here to ask you to consider authorizing more licenses for the growing and dispensing of marijuana for medical conditions.

Presently, only 4 licensed dispensaries are authorized in the entire state. Two of those four licensed dispensaries are owned by the same person, and he will be providing testimony this morning as well. One of the licensed dispensaries recently had an issue with two of their key employees being arrested for drug offenses. 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. The closest dispensary to 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. The closest dispensary for many of the residents in the Northeast Kingdom is over a two (2) hour drive, which is even much longer and dangerous in the winter time.

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.

The three current license holders have proposed allowing them to open satellite dispensaries around the state to meet the needs of Vermonters who do not live near a dispensary location. We are opposed to the notion that current license holders will adequately and fairly assist the underserved patients and geographic areas. Presently, at over \$370 per ounce, Vermonters are paying some of the highest costs in the country for marijuana. In the alternative, 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 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 simply by offering 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 three years and the only tangible results have been claims of excessive debt, the production of an inferior product, inadequate testing, and prohibitive pricing. With Massachusetts and Maine now having legalized marijuana, Vermonters are more likely to cross state lines to get their marijuana at a lower price and better quality. The other option available to Vermonters is to continue to go to a 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.