



LAW ENFORCEMENT ACTION PARTNERSHIP

ADVANCING JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY SOLUTIONS

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Date: January 25, 2022

Re: Vermont House Bill H.644-decriminalizes the possession and non-compensated sharing of personal use amounts of all regulated drugs
Position: SUPPORT

To: Chairperson Maxine Grad, House Judiciary Committee

Dear Chairperson Grad and Committee Members,

As a retired police chief and a speaker for the Law Enforcement Action Partnership, I am submitting testimony to express my support for **House Bill H.644** in Vermont. I believe that decriminalizing drug possession will help address Vermont's opioid crisis and rebuild police-community trust.

The Law Enforcement Action Partnership (LEAP) is a nonprofit group of police, prosecutors, judges, and other criminal justice professionals who speak from firsthand experience. Our mission is to make communities safer by focusing law enforcement resources on the greatest threats to public safety and addressing the root causes of crime.

In Vermont, overdose is one of the greatest threats to community safety. Drug overdose deaths involving opioids [increased 38 percent](#) from 114 in 2019 to 157 in 2020, and initial data from 2021 suggests that they [increased again](#).

We know that arresting people for drug possession does not stop overdoses or drug-related crimes. In fact, it is counterproductive, because it makes people hide from the authorities and fail to report crimes. We made a step in the right direction by establishing Syringe Service Programs because they reduce HIV and Hepatitis C transmission without increasing drug use or crime.

It's time for Vermont to take the next step and decriminalize personal use possession. There is no public safety rationale to keep arresting people on this charge.

LawEnforcementActionPartnership.org

Formerly known as Law Enforcement Against Prohibition

House Bill H.644 would fully decriminalize the possession and non-compensated sharing of personal use amounts of all regulated drugs.

This legislation would also reduce the number of “frequent flyer” arrests of citizens who have substance use disorder. These community members are in need of treatment and harm reduction services, not arrest. This bill would reduce the amount of time officers spend arresting people for these minor offenses and allow police to focus on serious crimes.

Finally, I believe that this bill would help reestablish police-community trust. During my 23 years of service in the Albany Police Department, before becoming chief, I was a patrol officer, a detective sergeant in the Children and Family Services Unit, a lieutenant in Special Operations, and a commander in the Detective Division. I saw that in order to solve the most serious crimes, we needed people to talk to us. When we arrest someone for drug possession, the community sees us wasting taxpayer resources and punishing someone who needs treatment. People who use drugs see these arrests and become afraid to report a crime or call 911 when a friend overdoses. We need the cooperation of the whole community, including those who use drugs but are concerned about being arrested, in order to protect public safety.

In short, supporting this legislation is common sense. We have a clear opportunity to reduce arrests, refocus officers’ time on serious crimes, provide better opportunities for access to needed services, and improve community trust.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective in support of this bill.

Respectfully,

Chief Brendan Cox (Ret.)
Albany Police Department, NY