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SCOTTI: Bill to reduce marijuana penalties makes sense

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More than 22,000 people are arrested every year in New Jersey for simple possession of marijuana. The results of these arrests can be devastating.

Currently, possession of two ounces or less of marijuana is a disorderly persons offense that carries a penalty of up to six months in jail and a \$1,000 fine. Additional fines of more than \$600 may also be imposed under the existing law.

Currently, a conviction also results in a criminal record that cannot be expunged for at least five years.

Once an individual is convicted, he or she is subject to a system of legal discrimination that makes it difficult or impossible to secure housing, employment, public assistance, federal student aid for higher education, and even a driver's license.

Even without a conviction, the collateral consequences of a mere arrest can include immeasurable stigma and humiliation, the sometimes unmanageable financial burden of posting bail and hiring a lawyer, and lost hours at work or school.

Most New Jerseyans agree that these penalties and consequences are far too severe.

A 2011 Eagleton poll found that 58 percent of New Jerseyans think penalties for use of marijuana should be decreased, and 55 percent think penalties for possession of marijuana should be eliminated entirely.

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Now the New Jersey Legislature is taking heed and considering a common-sense and compassionate reform.

On Monday, the Assembly Judiciary Committee will hold a hearing on Assembly Bill 1465, which would make possession of one-half ounce, or 15 grams, of marijuana a summary offense similar to a parking ticket and carrying a fine of between \$150 and \$500.

Arresting and prosecuting otherwise law-abiding citizens for a few sugar packets' worth of marijuana is a waste of law enforcement resources and taxpayer money. The current punishment doesn't fit the offense.

A-1465 is a popular and practical reform that will result in fairer penalties and less hardship, while saving taxpayers money.

Fourteen other states (Alaska, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, Ohio and Oregon) have already decriminalized possession of small quantities of marijuana for personal use, in amounts ranging from one-half ounce to three ounces.


A-1465 has 18 co-sponsors and bipartisan support. These sponsors are to be commended for moving forward with legislation that will promote fairness and save taxpayer money.

In 2010, there were more than 800,000 marijuana arrests in the United States — one every 37 seconds.

Almost 90 percent of these arrests were for simple possession, not distribution or manufacturing.

It is time to end this insanity. Monday's vote in Trenton is a step in the right direction.

Roseanne Scotti is New Jersey state director of the Drug Policy Alliance.

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