Yesterday, Connecticut lawmakers gave final approval to a bill (SB 1014) that will make the possession by an adult of up to one-half ounce of marijuana or marijuana paraphernalia a civil infraction, punishable by a $150 fine. Violators will no longer be subject to jail time and will not receive a criminal record. Currently, it is a criminal misdemeanor, punishable by up to a year in jail and a $1000 fine.

Governor Dannel Malloy has said that he will sign the bill, making the state the 14th in the nation to decriminalize possession of small amounts of the drug.

Under the bill, a second offense will be punishable by a fine of $200 to $500, and a third will result in mandatory drug addiction treatment. Under the legislation, the possession and use of even a small amount of marijuana by a person 21 or younger will lead to a 60-day driver's license suspension and referral to juvenile justice authorities.

In a statement, Governor Malloy said: "Final approval of this legislation accepts the reality that the current law does more harm than good - both in the impact it has on people's lives and the burden it places on police, prosecutors and probation officers of the criminal justice system. Let me make it clear - we are not legalizing the use of marijuana. In modifying this law, we are recognizing that the punishment should fit the crime, and acknowledging the effects of its application. There is no question that the state's criminal justice resources could be more effectively utilized for convicting, incarcerating and supervising violent and more serious offenders."

The Office of Fiscal Analysis reports that in 2009, there were 9,290 marijuana arrests of individuals 18 and older, of which approximately 75 percent were for possession of less than half an ounce. This means that the cases affected by the bill account for an estimated 5 percent of all statewide arrests. The office estimates that the state could save $885,000 in public defender and prosecutor salaries, while netting up to $1.4 million in fines.

According to the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML), seven states (Alaska, California, Maine, Massachusetts, Nebraska, New York, and Oregon) currently impose no criminal sanctions for possession of small amounts of the drug, while six states (Colorado, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nevada, North Carolina, and Ohio) have eliminated the potential for jail terms for first offenses while still classifying the offense as a misdemeanor or minor misdemeanor.
Connecticut lawmakers pass bill to decriminalize marijuana possession

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