

TO: RI House Committee on Judiciary
FROM: RI Center for Freedom & Prosperity, Mike Stenhouse
SUBJECT: Written Testimony re. Legalization of Recreational Marijuana (H5555); and Legislative Commission to study the issue (H5551)

April 11, 2017

Chairman Keable and Committee Members: As CEO for the RI Center for Freedom & Prosperity, a non-partisan research and advocacy organization, and with a degree in Economics from Harvard University, I would like to submit written testimony regarding H5555 and H5551, which are before your committee today. As a 501-C-3 nonprofit organization, our Center is not allowed to advise you to support or oppose any piece of legislation. However, we are allowed to discuss our research and perspectives with regard to the underlying issues.

Our Center believes that every Rhode Islander has the right to live their own lifestyle if that lifestyle does not infringe upon others. The issue of legalized recreational marijuana use presents a classic conflict between individual freedom and societal well-being.

Lives and careers are at stake. Based on significant national research, there are indeed legitimate societal questions about the negative and unintended consequences on family well-being and on the business community. Still, other research paints a less problematic picture.

It is our Center's recommendation that if our state is to move forward on the legalization issue in a responsible way, a review of this conflicting research on these very important questions must be vetted in a systematic manner. In order to collect more data from states that have already legalized recreational use, **our Center supports the concept of a two-year study commission.** We must not rush action on this potentially dangerous issue.

Rhode Island ranked a dismal 48th on the 2016 Family Prosperity Index, the broadest national research ever conducted on overall family well-being, which incorporated almost five-dozen factors. In that report, Rhode Island's problem with illicit drug use was one of the main negative factors. It would be reckless for lawmakers to legalize recreational marijuana use before we fully understand whether or not the conflicting research shows that such increased usage leads to increased abuse of opioids or other illicit drugs. Rhode Island must not blindly take this risk.

Risks to the Business Community. Last week, our Center published a policy brief that documented the legal and financial risks that improperly implemented legislation could impose on our state's employers. Among the serious business issues that could arise, many of which have been publicly validated and discussed by the Attorney General of the State of Rhode Island, are:

- Increased legal jeopardy for employers; lawsuits are already mounting across the country, including our state
- Decreased workplace safety
- Increased drug testing costs for employers
- Increased workers' compensation costs and related liabilities
- Difficulty in identifying, hiring, and maintaining drug-free employees
- Decreased employee productivity

State of Rhode Island in Legal Jeopardy? Our Center also advises you to be aware of the shifting federal landscape on this issue. The Obama administration openly took the position that it would not enforce related federal law. Yet, the Trump administration signaled in late February that it is considering stricter enforcement of existing federal marijuana laws when it comes to states acting independently on the matter. Rhode Island cannot afford a costly legal battle, nor can we afford federal enforcement penalties. This important federal legal question is yet another issue that could be cleared up in a two-year commission.

Finally, in a prior statement our Center asked the question; *“How would any family benefit from increased usage of marijuana or any other substance (alcohol or drug)?”* If we are truly concerned about the well-being our state's minors and families, I ask you to inquire of supporters of this bill who will testify before you today to give you an honest answer to this simple, but vital question.

Thank you. If I can be of service, please contact me at mstenhouse@RIFreedom.org or 401.429.6115.