
Government of the District of Columbia



Metropolitan Police Department

Testimony of
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Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
United States House of Representatives

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Room 2154
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Good morning, Chairman Mica, Ranking Member Connolly, Members of the Committee, and members of the public. I am Peter Newsham, Assistant Chief of the District of Columbia Metropolitan Police Department (MPD). I am pleased to be here today to discuss the District of Columbia's recent legislation to decriminalize small amounts of marijuana.

The Marijuana Possession Decriminalization Amendment Act of 2014 (D.C. Act 20-305) (the Act), which is projected to become effective law in mid-July, amends the District of Columbia's criminal code to decriminalize the possession of one ounce or less of marijuana. Instead of facing a misdemeanor charge punishable by up to six months in jail, up to \$1,000 fine, or both, once the Act goes into effect, individuals will be subject to a \$25 civil fine and MPD officers can seize any visible marijuana.

The use of marijuana on public space will remain a criminal penalty, punishable by up to 60 days in jail or a fine of up to \$500. The Act defines public space as: 1) any street, alley, sidewalk, park, or parking area; 2) a vehicle on any street, alley, park, or parking area; and 3) any place to which the public is invited.

Public attitudes about marijuana use have changed significantly in recent years, with many accepting it to be no more harmful or addictive than alcohol or tobacco. Decriminalizing marijuana may help reduce the number of people with arrest records for possession of small amounts of marijuana, which may enable them to more easily find gainful employment. The Act maintains criminal penalties for selling marijuana and public usage of marijuana, which is important to combat drug dealing and to ensure neighborhoods' quality of life.

Even though the District of Columbia will decriminalize possession of small amounts of marijuana, we will continue to send the message, especially to our young people, of marijuana's dangers and effects – just as we do with alcohol and tobacco – to discourage them from using it.

Due to the District's unique status, some federal law enforcement agencies, such as the U.S. Park Police, have concurrent jurisdiction in the District of Columbia and can enforce District or federal law anywhere in the city. Although MPD officers will enforce the Act, federal law enforcement agencies are not bound by the Act so long as the possession or use of marijuana remains a federal criminal offense.

I thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be happy to address any questions you may have.