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Written Testimony to the Joint Committee on Judiciary for Friday, February 26, 2021

Opposition to Governor's Bill SB-888 "An Act Responsibly and Equitably Regulating Adult-Use Cannabis"

To Co-Chair Winfield, Co-Chair Stafstrom and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony opposed to Senate Bill 888.

On behalf of the Connecticut Youth Services Association (CYSA), we feel that it is imperative **that the State of Connecticut carefully consider the serious public health and safety implications for any legislation that would legalize and commercialize the sale of marijuana. Because of these implications for youth and families, CYSA must oppose any such legislative proposals that do not implicitly address these concerns.** CYSA is urging the Governor and all Connecticut legislators to carefully consider the available research and to weigh both the financial and human costs associated with legalization.

As the mission of CYSA is "...promoting the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families," and the statutory charge of all Youth Service Bureaus (YSBs) is to function as the "coordinating unit of community-based services to provide comprehensive delivery of prevention, intervention, treatment, and follow up services" (CGS 10-19m), it is our duty to inform the public as to the **numerous negative health and public safety implications for youth and families** that would come with legalization. YSBs often serve as lead agencies for their local substance abuse prevention coalitions. Their cross-sector efforts to reduce adolescent substance abuse are rooted at the community level and broadly utilize evidenced-based programs for prevention, counseling, social services, juvenile justice and diversion. They are contending with the realities of adolescent marijuana use on a regular basis.

S.B. 888 *An Act Responsibly and Equitably Regulating Adult-Use Cannabis* would appear an improvement over previous bills that lacked any substantive language to address public health concerns and similar to some previous bills, it also aims to address some long-standing inequities in

our criminal justice system related to marijuana offenses. CYSA would much rather join legislators to support such criminal and social justice reforms that align with our common values and mission. Sadly, we struggle to see the balance in this legislation that would also green-light an industry whose products are exceedingly risky if not overtly harmful to youth and young adults. There is a difference between modifying laws to allow for possession and use of a substance for adults versus laws that also expand and promote its use. Legislators must also understand that marijuana products are continuing to become more attractive to young people for a number of factors, and with greater accessibility to these products, this becomes more concerning.

There seems to be some pressure to rush this legislation for fear of “falling behind” other states, although it remains unclear to many youth advocates, parents, schools and law enforcement as to how that’s bad for our public health concerns. In a time where marijuana products and potency continue to constantly evolve ahead of attempts to understand and regulate them, we must be highly suspicious and on guard. There are lessons to be learned from our woeful standards for the alcohol industry to our lack of vigilance and response when vaping recently ensnared many of our teens with nicotine addiction and cannabis abuse. From edibles to oils, dabs and waxes we need to pay close attention to how products are manufactured, used, and manipulated. There is clearly a growing concern for how high-potency products may impact brain development and mental health.

A common argument that the potential for marijuana abuse among youth and young adults is already a problem and therefore legalizing it for adults will not change that. This is in part true. It is not only a challenge to prevent all types of youth substance abuse but one that is increasingly difficult. The question remains as to whether one believes that legalization and commercialization is somehow a path to decreasing youth use, or does it potentially contribute to the problems we are facing. Unfortunately, the research and the experiences within our communities supports the latter. If the desire is to truly minimize the access and messaging to youth regarding marijuana if legalized, there must be serious attention paid to **regulate, monitor and enforce limits on access and advertising** as well as **more funding for community-based prevention and treatment efforts**. Legislators should take this into account as they consider legislative proposals that would include legalizing marijuana, as these costs may far exceed tax revenue from projected marijuana sales. Marijuana legislation that does not specifically earmark more funding to prevention and treatment is simply not good legislation.

The **primary concerns** for youth related to legalization are the potential **increase in access** to marijuana products and the **increased exposure to positive messaging** regarding general use of

marijuana. This would result from increased number of available marijuana products including edibles, waxes and vapes, plus increased product promotion and advertisement. Our youth are among the most susceptible to damage related to marijuana abuse, given exposure during adolescence is connected to a whole host of potential health problems. As normal brain development continues until approximately age twenty-five, the youth population through adolescence and young adulthood is at greater risk. Medical research overwhelmingly demonstrates the impact of marijuana to the developing brain and body, altering the development with potentially permanent effects. The CDC warns “when marijuana users begin using as teenagers, the drug may reduce attention, memory, and learning functions and affect how the brain builds connections between the areas necessary for these functions.” Other studies show increased risk for mental health problems and further substance abuse.

There is evidence that retail marijuana could disproportionately impact vulnerable populations and families within certain locations, such as urban areas. Several studies have suggested the potential exists for **marijuana dispensaries to be located with more density** in areas where risk factors for abuse may be higher, such as areas with higher crime rates, more racial and ethnic minorities and lower income. Studies of outlet density have consistently recommended the need for specific regulation to limit the number of dispensaries in areas considered at risk, in addition to increasing both prevention and treatment resources in such areas. There are many variables to consider when determining the potential impact of retail marijuana in any specific location, and clearly Connecticut would benefit from more time to observe how other states manage the development of the marijuana industry. More research is needed.

Similarly, Connecticut would benefit from more time to observe the implications of legalization on the juvenile justice system. Early evidence from other states where marijuana was legalized is quite concerning, as it indicates increases in juvenile offenses and greater risk factors among vulnerable populations. According to Kevin Sabet (2018) report “Marijuana and Legalization Impacts” “...juvenile marijuana-related arrests have increased among African American and Hispanic teens in Colorado after legalization.” As YSB Juvenile Review Boards play an integral role in community-based diversion from court, we have concerns about the impact legalization will have on youth access to marijuana and the subsequent arrest of young people for possession of those drugs. Should marijuana legalization place an additional burden on the community-based diversion system, the State must ensure that adequate resources and services are available for screening, early intervention and referral to treatment, as needed.

If legislators believe that legalization is still a path to pursue, one must question the readiness of Connecticut to take this on, and greater risk to enact this legislation especially with the prevalence of other concerning health trends for youth. Rates of youth depression and anxiety have been on the rise, along with rates of teen suicide. Current research suggests that marijuana use during adolescence only adds to risk factors for mental health problems including depression and psychosis. A study by Gobbi, et al, (2019) suggests adolescent marijuana use may lead to higher risk for suicide as a young adult. There must also be concern for the ongoing opioid epidemic. While marijuana may be viewed by some as a marginally safer alternative for those who may abuse drugs, marijuana remains a substance that by itself is potentially addictive, destructive and can lead to abusing more dangerous types of substances like opioids.

As a State, we must consider the implications of a public health policy that places a higher value on recreational drug use than it does our state's need to address and reduce adolescent substance use while improving health outcomes for all.

In addition to these considerations and concerns, we also ask that you engage your local YSB or CYSA when making such critical policy decisions. As our roles allow us to work on macro and micro issues across multiple sectors from juvenile justice, behavioral health, to prevention, our network of YSBs have a unique understanding of our communities, our state, and our youth. Additionally, we may also be able to convene groups of youth themselves for discussions, as each YSB facilitates a student advisory groups for these such purposes, so that you may hear directly from them. As always, we look forward to building a state that lifts up all its youth so that they may raise up Connecticut.

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