Marijuana Series: New Jersey Assembly Oversight, Reform and Federal Relations Committee Holds First Hearing on the Impact of Potential Marijuana Legalization

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On Monday, March 5, the New Jersey Assembly Oversight, Reform and Federal Relations Committee conducted a lengthy hearing before an overflow crowd in order to "receive testimony from invited speakers on the impact of prospective marijuana legislation on the public health, criminal justice system, and economy in New Jersey." At the outset of the hearing, the Committee Chairman, Assemblyman Joe Danielson, acknowledged that the Committee was "starting with a blank slate" and that the intent of the hearing was for the Committee to "listen, to be educated, and ask questions of clarification." The Committee did not consider any specific legislation during the hearing but instead heard testimony from witnesses including New Jersey residents, as well as individuals from outside of New Jersey. The out-of-state witnesses included, among others, Colorado State Representative Dan Pabon, Massachusetts Cannabis Control Commissioner Shaleen Title, Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department Captain Todd Raybuck, and Kevin Sabet, President and CEO of Smart Approaches to Marijuana.

Over a dozen witnesses testified in support of legalization, citing a host of benefits that the State and its citizens could reap from legalization. Some advocates cited economic growth and jobs, while others focused on social justice issues and the ability of cannabis to act as a meaningful alternative to opioids. Meanwhile, opponents, including former New Jersey State Police Superintendent Col. Rick Fuentes, described negative impacts in States that have already legalized marijuana and expressed concerns about similar consequences for New Jersey. Other witnesses focused on the impact that legalization could have on the State's medical marijuana program and advocated for an expansion of that program.

Following the conclusion of the hearing, Assemblyman Danielson issued a press release in which he stated that "I want to thank everyone who testified for their input. This was a great start to the Assembly's work on this issue, and I look forward to more debate in the weeks ahead. We heard several hours of productive and invaluable discussion that will prove helpful as we consider all arguments. We started as a blank slate, and the committee received a great education, but it's just the beginning. The committee will hold three additional hearings across the [State]. All the hearings will be on Saturday – starting with April 21 at Rowan University and then May 12 at Bergen Community College. A third location in central New Jersey will be determined. This is an important civil justice, health care and law enforcement issue. We will hear all viewpoints and continue to get an education."

For those hoping that New Jersey would quickly enact legislation to legalize marijuana, a hope spurred on by Governor

Murphy's consistent support for legalization, the hearing, and Assemblyman Danielson's post-hearing statement, made it clear that the Assembly is only at the beginning, rather than the end, of its examination of this issue. Whether that examination will ultimately lead to legalization is very much an open question at this time.