



TRANSCRIPT: Rep. Tulsi Gabbard Calls for Federal Decriminalization of Marijuana

I'm rising today to urge my colleagues to support H.R.1227, the Ending Federal Marijuana Prohibition Act, which I've introduced with my Republican colleague, a fellow Army veteran and former prosecutor from the State of Virginia, Congressman Tom Garrett, where we are seeking to address our outdated and widely problematic marijuana laws by federally decriminalizing marijuana.

FBI reports have shown that in 2011 alone, an individual in the United States was arrested for marijuana use, sale or possession every 42 seconds—every 42 seconds—mostly in poor and minority communities. Our current laws are turning everyday Americans into criminals, sending them to jail, ruining their lives, tearing apart families and wasting huge amounts of taxpayer dollars to arrest, prosecute and incarcerate people for marijuana use — a drug that has been proven time and time again to be far less dangerous than alcohol, both for individual consumers as well as for the people around them.

Dr. Donald Abrams, who is the Chief of Oncology at San Francisco General Hospital, has talked about how in the 37 years that he has worked and served as a physician, the number of patients that he's admitted to his hospital with marijuana complications are zero. The number of patients that he's admitted due to alcohol use is—quote—“profound”.

So, rather than actually helping people, our current laws are turning them into criminals, forever impacting their future and the future of their families. Over the years we've spent hundreds of billions of dollars locking people up for nonviolent marijuana offenses, creating strain within our criminal justice system, clogging court calendars and resulting in further overcrowding our prisons.

Now, just a few weeks ago I had the chance to go and visit a number of our prisons and jails in Hawai'i, where I saw firsthand the crumbling infrastructure, the extreme overcrowding and facilities in dire need of upgrades, as well as the shortage of services that are actually needed to help rehabilitate people and reduce our recidivism rates. So whether you personally think that marijuana use is good or bad, whether you would choose to use marijuana or not, the question is, should we really be sending people to jail and turning them into criminals for it? The answer is no. The fiscal impacts, the social impacts of our current policy, are having devastating ripple effects on individuals and our communities and are only continuing to perpetuate the problem.

For example, the contradiction that we see currently between state and federal laws on marijuana has created a serious problem for many of our local businesses. I've talked with local bankers in my home state of Hawai'i who express great frustration and even confusion about the contradiction between our laws—the fact that our state of Hawai'i has legalized and authorized marijuana dispensaries to grow, process, and dispense medical marijuana, but federal law also prohibits banks and credit unions from offering any type of financial services to both businesses and individuals whose financial transactions have anything to do with marijuana. So what this means in a practical term is our state-recognized and licensed medical marijuana dispensary owners, as well as their employees, can't open a bank account, can't get a loan from our local banks. The businesses have to literally hold thousands or even millions of dollars and conduct their transactions in cash. Businesses that provide services to these medical marijuana dispensaries are also unable to access financial services due to the gaps between federal and state law.

So as we look at ways that we need to update our outdated drug policies and the need for us to reform a very broken criminal justice system, we need to take into account the growing body of evidence that suggests the medicinal benefits of marijuana, including preventing epileptic seizures, reducing anxiety, and even halting the growth of cancer cells. However, the FDA still currently classifies marijuana as a Schedule 1 classification, basically saying that marijuana is like heroin, LSD and MDMA, ignoring the fact that at least 28 states, including my home state of Hawai'i have already accepted the medical use of marijuana under state law. We need to require the FDA to remove marijuana from Schedule 1 based on state-accepted medical use.

These reforms that we are calling for in this bipartisan bill are common sense and they are long overdue—long overdue changes that will help to reduce the strain on our criminal justice system, create certainty and reduce contradictions and confusion between state and federal law, and update those federal laws to actually meet the needs and progress that states are making across the country.