

PANCO

Pennsylvania Association of Nationally Chartered Organizations

TESTIMONY

HB 1393

House Health and Human Services Committee

Public Hearing

Wednesday December 2, 2009

Presented by

Thomas W. Helsel, Jr.
PESA Government Relations Chair

Glenn Foster
PESA Drug Awareness Chair

Chairman Oliver, Chairman Baker, distinguished members of the House Health and Human Services Committee, good morning. My name is Tom Helsel and I am the secretary of the Pennsylvania Association of Nationally Chartered Organizations. PANCO is comprised of both fraternal and veteran organizations chartered at a national level. One of our member organizations is the Pennsylvania Elks State Association and consequently its subordinate lodges throughout our great Commonwealth.

Not only do I serve as secretary of PANCO, but I serve as the Government Relations Chairman for the Pennsylvania Elks State Association. It is primarily in that capacity that I sit here before you today. The Pennsylvania Elks State Association was founded in 1906 and exists to promote the programs of the state association as well as those of the Grand Lodge of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks. The B.P.O.E. was founded in 1868 and constituted its first lodge in Pennsylvania in 1871, Philadelphia Lodge #2. Since 1871 hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians have belonged to our honorable fraternity. Today Pennsylvania boasts 101 Lodges throughout our Commonwealth.

The B.P.O.E. established the Elks National Drug Awareness Program in 1982. The Elks Drug Awareness Program strives to teach all children and parents about the dangers of illegal drug use and prevent the abuse of legalized and prescription drugs. As the largest volunteer drug awareness program in the United States, the program relies on state, district and Lodge volunteers to promote a drug-free lifestyle. The Elks have developed an effective, community-based drug prevention program by partnering with federal agencies including the Drug Enforcement Agency, Office of National Drug Control Policy, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and national organizations such as Pride Youth Programs. These partnerships ensure the Elks Drug Awareness Program addresses the leading drug abuse issues facing communities today. With that said, it would be remiss of our fraternity to allow such a controversial issue as presented by HB 1393 to go unnoticed. I am here today to state our opposition to that legislation.

With me today is Glenn Foster of Hanover Elks Lodge #763. Mr. Foster is the Pennsylvania Elks State Association's Drug Awareness Chairman. With your permission Mr. Chairman, I would like to turn the balance of our presentation over to Mr. Foster.

Thank you Mr. Chairman for allowing Mr. Helsel and myself to present testimony before your Committee this morning. I am Glenn Foster and I am the Pennsylvania Elks State Association's Drug Awareness Chairman. The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks Drug Awareness Program is dedicated to preventing the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other illicit drugs by the youth of our country. Elks with the assistance of our committed partners are able to actively educate students and adults while assisting scholastic institutions with scientific based prevention programs and drug information.

It is my job to oversee and help implement these programs developed by and through the Elks Drug Awareness Program in Pennsylvania. To that end I oversee 10 districts statewide that are comprised of our 101 Lodges.

I am here to voice opposition to HB 1393. Our belief is that by legalizing marijuana in the context provided under this legislation it brings it one step closer to legalizing the use of marijuana by the public as a whole. Proponents will say that only those who are truly in need and meet the definitions under the Act will be prescribed this drug. They will say that the state will set forth strict guidelines for its prescription to prevent illicit use. But rather, what we as a state will be offering is a new and easy source of procuring marijuana for unlawful purposes.

We believe that since the United States Food and Drug Administration has not approved marijuana for medicinal use, it would not be prudent for our Commonwealth to do so. The American Medical Association in a June 2001 policy statement questioned the efficacy and the application of marijuana for the treatment of disease due to a lack of adequate and well-controlled studies. The AMA "recommends that marijuana be retained in Schedule I of the Controlled Substances Act pending the outcome of such studies."

At greater risk is the gateway effect on our youth that allowing prescription marijuana will bring. The abuse of prescription drugs is prevalent in today's society. Not a day passes without a news article detailing abuse of oxycotin, valium, vicodan or other prescription drugs. Articles appear on the abuse of over the counter pharmaceuticals being subverted into methamphetamines and other highly addictive illegal drugs. We are gravely concerned that by allowing for the prescribed use of marijuana it will only open this gate wider.

There is no safe way to control the prescribed use of marijuana. As we have seen through the continued abuses of other prescription drugs, the ability for marijuana to get into the hands of our children will only increase. The fact that it would now be considered a legitimate prescription drug will only increase this demand. Children and young adults will see this as a paving of the way to full legitimacy.

I would further question the wisdom of allowing prescribed users the ability to grow their own marijuana. In the 13 states that allow for medical marijuana, all allow users to cultivate their own. The number of plants varies from 6 to 24 and the usable amount from 1 ounce to 24

ounces. There is no consensus as to what is allowable. Given this and the opening of a medical marijuana café in Portland, Oregon I question how we keep medical marijuana from the hands of our youth.

In a survey conducted by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, 40 percent of teens -- about 10 million -- say they can get marijuana within a day while about 25 percent -- 5.7 million teens -- say they can find marijuana within an hour. They also indicated it was easier to purchase marijuana than it was cigarettes or beer. Couple these facts with the abuses of legally prescribed drugs and we can only see a greater rise in marijuana and other substance abuse.

Marijuana is used solely for its intoxicating effects. It is used to obtain a drug induced high and serves no other purpose. Legalizing through medicinal use and/or liberalizing through decriminalization will only result in an increase in public intoxication, an increase in crime, place a greater burden on our civic resources and be a harmful detriment to our greatest precious asset, our children.

The Pennsylvania Elks State Association opposes HB1393 and I respectively ask you to oppose it as well.