



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND
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Peter F. Neronha
Attorney General

March 21, 2024

The Honorable Robert E. Craven, Sr.
Chairman
House Committee on Judiciary
State House, House Lounge
Providence, RI 02903

Re: HB 7315: Decriminalizing Simple Drug Possession

Dear Chairman Craven and Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

As Attorney General, I have supported and continue to support legislation and other initiatives that would reform our criminal justice system, with a particular focus on the criminal justice system's impact on those in Rhode Island who are suffering from addiction. Today, however, I write to express concerns with HB 7315, legislation that would decriminalize simple drug possession entirely, making it a civil violation punishable only by fines.

In my time as Attorney General, I have not only supported, but also spearheaded efforts to reclassify simple possession of small amounts of controlled substances from a felony to a misdemeanor. And as you know, in 2021, the General Assembly passed that legislation, submitted at my request. Together, we are reducing the collateral consequences of drug addiction and re-focusing law enforcement resources on public safety priorities.

Since that legislation was enacted, hundreds of simple possession cases that would have been prosecuted as felonies have instead been referred to diversion drug court, providing eligible individuals an alternative to receiving a conviction, or resulted in misdemeanor dispositions. The involvement of the criminal justice system has been instrumental in ensuring that individuals in need of treatment resources are referred to appropriate programs. It also provides added incentives to pursue treatment. This oversight and incentive would disappear if the offenses were to be decriminalized altogether.

While I have clearly recognized the concern for over-criminalizing users and those suffering from substance use disorder, the legislation before you today would decriminalize simple drug possession entirely. I would caution the committee that this legislation would result in unintended consequences. As we are currently seeing elsewhere in the country, legislation that decriminalizes dangerous drugs has led to greater public use with negative impacts on the community and public health and safety.

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For these reasons, I respectfully oppose HB 7315. As always, I appreciate the Committee's consideration and am available for any further questions the Committee may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "P. Neronha", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Peter F. Neronha
Attorney General