



LAW ENFORCEMENT ACTION PARTNERSHIP

ADVANCING JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY SOLUTIONS

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Date: August 24, 2021

Re: Deprioritizing Enforcement of Controlled Substance Possession

Dear Local Leaders,

We are writing today as Massachusetts law enforcement and as speakers for the Law Enforcement Action Partnership (LEAP) to explain why we support deprioritizing the use of justice resources for controlled substance possession. LEAP is a nonprofit group of police, prosecutors, judges, and other criminal justice professionals who speak from firsthand experience. Our mission is to make communities safer by focusing law enforcement resources on the greatest threats to public safety and restoring police-community trust.

As current and former law enforcement, we know firsthand that justice resources are limited and need to be prioritized toward the greatest threats of public safety. Oftentimes, low priority cases create a backlog and more serious cases are put on the backburner. Drug arrests are so frequent and use a substantial amount of justice system resources.

Arresting someone for drug possession not only fails to make our communities safer, it also criminalizes people at the expense of helping them. Often, an arrest means spending time in jail. When people cannot show up to work or take care of their family, it can cost them employment, family relationships, and access to housing. Nothing destabilizes someone's life like an arrest, and instability and stress are key triggers for drug relapses and mental health issues.

One way to better focus justice system resources is for cities to officially deprioritize enforcement of possession of controlled substances. In 2017, a MassInc poll found that [two in three voters](#) in Massachusetts view drug addiction as a public health problem rather than a crime problem. Several jurisdictions across the country have already declined to prosecute drug possession, including Baltimore City, Maryland, King County, Washington,

and Contra Costa County, California. At the state level, Oregon has decriminalized low-level possession of all drugs.

In addition, cities should deprioritize enforcement of laws concerning the cultivation, transportation, and exchange of psychedelic plants. In the past few years, Denver, Colorado; Oakland and Santa Cruz, California; Ann Arbor, Michigan. and Washington, D.C. have deprioritized offenses related to psychedelic plants.

Massachusetts is emerging as a leader in deprioritizing drug offenses. Somerville, Cambridge, and Northampton have deprioritized all controlled substances and psychedelics. Several other jurisdictions are moving forward with deprioritization, including Boston, Salem, and Easthampton.

Police do not want to be asked to arrest people seeking solutions for mental health issues. A study from the Journal of the American Medical Association found that psilocybin mushroom use combined with therapy or counseling puts major depression in remission for one in two patients – that is [more than four times more effective](#) than conventional medication. MDMA is also in advanced stages of FDA approval. Police officers respond to many mental health crisis calls and suicide attempts. We also struggle with PTSD and depression at far higher rates than the general public, and suicide is a leading cause of officer mortality.

Deprioritizing drug enforcement can also improve police-community trust, particularly in communities of color. One study showed that at least 65 percent of Bostonians arrested for drug possession were Black or Hispanic, while these groups represent only 37 percent of the population and do not use drugs at higher rates. With decriminalization, Oregon [projects a 95 percent decrease](#) in racial inequalities in controlled-substance related arrests.

Officers are also affected by having to enforce these laws. Encounters for controlled substance possession can go tragically wrong, endangering civilians and officers alike while further eroding trust in law enforcement.

In light of the addiction and mental health crisis, made even worse by the pandemic, we believe deprioritization is the answer. Our communities would benefit by making drug possession the lowest law enforcement priority.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our experience in support of this effort.

Respectfully,

Lt. Sarko Gergerian
Winthrop Police Department, MA

LawEnforcementActionPartnership.org

Formerly known as Law Enforcement Against Prohibition

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