
Government of the District of Columbia



Metropolitan Police Department

Testimony of
Peter Newsham
Assistant Chief of Police

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
United States House of Representatives

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Rayburn House Office Building
Room 2154
Washington, DC 20515

Good morning, Chairman Mica, Ranking Member Connolly, Members of the Committee, and members of the public. I am Peter Newsham, Assistant Chief of the District of Columbia Metropolitan Police Department (MPD). I am pleased to be here today to discuss the District of Columbia's recent legislation to decriminalize small amounts of marijuana.

The Marijuana Possession Decriminalization Amendment Act of 2014 (D.C. Act 20-305) (the Act), which is projected to become effective law in mid-July, amends the District of Columbia's criminal code to decriminalize the possession of one ounce or less of marijuana. Instead of facing a misdemeanor charge punishable by up to six months in jail, up to \$1,000 fine, or both, once the Act goes into effect, individuals will be subject to a \$25 civil fine and MPD officers can seize any visible marijuana.

The use of marijuana on public space will remain a criminal penalty, punishable by up to 60 days in jail or a fine of up to \$500. The Act defines public space as: 1) any street, alley, sidewalk, park, or parking area; 2) a vehicle on any street, alley, park, or parking area; and 3) any place to which the public is invited.

Public attitudes about marijuana use have changed significantly in recent years, with many accepting it to be no more harmful or addictive than alcohol or tobacco. Decriminalizing marijuana may help reduce the number of people with arrest records for possession of small amounts of marijuana, which may enable them to more easily find gainful employment. The Act maintains criminal penalties for selling marijuana and public usage of marijuana, which is important to combat drug dealing and to ensure neighborhoods' quality of life.

Even though the District of Columbia will decriminalize possession of small amounts of marijuana, we will continue to send the message, especially to our young people, of marijuana's dangers and effects – just as we do with alcohol and tobacco – to discourage them from using it.

Due to the District's unique status, some federal law enforcement agencies, such as the U.S. Park Police, have concurrent jurisdiction in the District of Columbia and can enforce District or federal law anywhere in the city. Although MPD officers will enforce the Act, federal law enforcement agencies are not bound by the Act so long as the possession or use of marijuana remains a federal criminal offense.

I thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be happy to address any questions you may have.

Assistant Chief Peter Newsham

Assistant Chief Peter Newsham joined the Metropolitan Police Department in 1989 and rose quickly through the ranks, serving in a number of district operational assignments. Chief Charles H. Ramsey promoted him to Commander of the Second District in January 2000.

In June 2002, Newsham was promoted to Assistant Chief in charge of the Office of Professional Responsibility, which included the Internal Affairs Division, Civil Rights and Force Investigation Division, and Compliance Monitoring Team, responsible for overseeing the MPD's Memorandum of Agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice. Newsham took the position of Assistant Chief in Charge of ROC-North in July 2004.

On September 23, 2007, Chief Cathy L. Lanier announced a reorganization of the Metropolitan Police Department and put Assistant Chief Newsham in charge of the Internal Affairs Bureau. In 2008, Assistant Chief Newsham was named the Assistant Chief of the Investigative Services Bureau.

Newsham holds a bachelor's degree from the College of the Holy Cross and a law degree at the University of Maryland School of Law. He is a member of the Maryland Bar.