

Activist Training Guide

Texas NORML – A Preparation for the 2015 Legislative Session

The only way to change marijuana laws in Texas is through the legislature. The Texas House of Representatives and Senate meet every two years for approximately 140 days.

It is an intense process, over 10,000 bills were filed in the 2013 legislative session. Each bill must first be introduced by a House and/or Senate Member with as many co-sponsors as possible. Next, the bill will be assigned to a committee based on the code of law it would modify. The committee may hold a hearing with public testimony and vote to move the bill forward to the Calendars Committee (in the House) or the Senate Administration Committee (in the Senate), who may then schedule the bill for a debate by the full House and/or Senate members, with the goal of reaching a favorable vote by a majority of the legislators in the chamber it was filed in. That process must happen in both the House and Senate before it moves on to the lieutenant governor and then governor's desk to be signed, enacted by default or vetoed.

Texas' constitution does not allow for statewide voter initiatives such as the one that made Prop 215 (California's Medical Marijuana Law), possible. Over 20 other states do not have voter initiatives.

The Keys to Change in Texas Are:

#1 - VOTE for who is most likely to support a positive change in marijuana law. This means doing your homework about each candidate to see how they stand on other personal and social issues and how what their stances are. It is also an excellent idea to call their office (existing or campaign) and ask the question directly, "Do you support a change in marijuana law that will enable it to be regulated and available for adult/medical use", as an example.

#2 - CALL and WRITE your current legislators to inquire about their stance and address any concerns they have about ending cannabis prohibition. Let them know you are educated, interested and active. Call or write as often as you'd like but stay on topic and professional. Please do this even if the person you voted for did not get elected.

#3 – VISIT your current legislators. It may sound like a big step (and it is) but regular people do it all the time. It is how laws get changed!

#4 – Stay Involved – Stay tuned to Texas NORML's newsletter and follow bills on the Texas Legislature's website so that you can make sure to take part in any action alerts or hearings.

The following pages will guide you through writing your representative/senator, making a phone call to your their offices, and visiting the capitol to meet with your lawmakers or their staff. The first step is finding out who they are and how to contact them!

Locate your Representative and Senator:

Visit This Website: <http://www.fyi.legis.state.tx.us/>

Enter your address and click the "Submit" button. Your US Senator and Representative for Texas are listed first, followed by your elected State Officials: State Senator, State Representative, and State Board of Education member. Click on your Texas State Representative's and/or Senator's name. This will take you to their respective House or Senate member page which lists their contact information, as well as background such as bills they have authored or supported.

Note Your Representative and Senator's Contact Info:

State House Rep: District: ____ Name: _____ / Phone # _____ / Address: _____

State Senator: District: ____ Name: _____ / Phone # _____ / Address: _____

Write Your Representative and Senator

Once you have found your legislator's page, look below their name and [click the Email button](#). You can choose to email or print and send your letter by mail. Simply fill in the requested information and type or paste in the body of your letter. It is important that you write the Representative and Senator from **your** District. You elect this person and they are interested to hear what you think as their constituent.

Etiquette Guidelines:

Always

1. Be courteous and respectful without "gushing."
2. Clearly and simply state the purpose of your letter. If it's about a certain bill, identify it correctly.
3. Say who you are. Anonymous letters go nowhere. Even in email, include your correct name, address, phone number and email address. If you don't include at least your name and address, you will not get a response.
4. Keep your letter short -- one page is best.
5. Represent yourself as an individual voter, not as a representative of NORML or any other organization. You want your message to count individually.
6. Use specific examples, a personal story, and evidence to support your position. Make sure to share you resources with them!
7. State what it is you want done or recommend a course of action.
8. Thank the member for taking the time to read your letter.
9. When addressing your envelope, please address it to "The Honorable (full name of Representative/Senator), followed by their address.

Never

1. Use vulgarity, profanity, or threats. The first two are just plain rude and the third can get you a visit from the Secret Service. Simply stated, don't let your passion get in the way of making your point.
2. Fail to include your name and address, even in email letters.
3. Demand a response.

Next is an example of a letter you can modify and send to your legislators.

Your Name
Your Address Line 1
Your Address Line 2

Letter Date

The Honorable Representative/Senator (full name)
Address Line 1
Address Line 2

Dear Representative/Senator (last name),

I am contacting you concerning the prospects of legislation to legalize medical marijuana (scientifically known as cannabis), to change possession of marijuana from a criminal to a civil offense and to create an adult retail market for marijuana in Texas. I reside in your District and these issues are very important to me as I feel the current status of our marijuana laws affects many other issues.

Marijuana is legal for medical use in 23 states and Washington, D.C. enabling doctors to legally recommend cannabis to patients suffering from epilepsy, PTSD, chronic pain, cancer, MS, diabetes, arthritis, AIDS, and a variety of other ailments, depending on the laws enacted. There are over 17,000 published papers on the scientific and medicinal value of this plant. It is unquestionably the safest drug known to man. In Houston, at the Texas Children's Hospital, they are even researching a new cannabis based medicine but we need to change the law to let Texas patients have access to cannabis is medicine (<http://www.thedailychronic.net/2014/37977/texas-childrens-hospital-part-of-first-clinical-trial-for-epidiolex-in-children-with-dravet-syndrome/>). In America, over 46% of our citizens have safe access to medical marijuana. In Texas, 8.6% of the population is made up of Veterans (http://governor.state.tx.us/files/twic/Veterans_in_Texas.pdf). Texas Veterans should not be second-class citizens based on the state that they live in. All Veterans should have safe and legal access to medical marijuana. Please take a moment to watch this episode of Texas Monthly Talks hosted at the Rice University's Baker Institute (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8EQ7mX3I70>).

In 2012, the state of Texas arrested over 72,000 individuals for marijuana offenses, 98% of those for possession only, a non-violent offense. Texas spends an average of \$10,000 per arrest for these possession charges, while only spending \$8,908 to educate each child for one year in 2012-2013 school year, leaving us ranked 44 out of 51 (<http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/NEA-Rankings-and-Estimates-2013-2014.pdf>). Surely we would be better served prioritizing these funds to educate our children instead of criminalizing people for possessing a plant! Imagine the taxpayer dollars that could be saved if these citizens were not caged or put into a system for a non-violent offense!

In 2004, 74% of Texans supported medical cannabis according to a Scripps and Howard poll. A poll from Texas Public Policy shows that 79% of Texans support drug law reform. Another poll from Public Policy shows that 61% of Texans support decriminalization and 58% changing Texas law to regulate and tax marijuana similarly to alcohol, where stores would be licensed to sell marijuana to adults 21 and older. And now, 77 percent of registered Texas voters believe in some form of legal marijuana, according to UT and the Texas Tribune.

I am asking you to introduce or support legislation allowing marijuana for medical benefits, decriminalization, or legalization in Texas. It is what is right for our District, our State and most importantly the individuals you represent.

Thank you for your representation and taking the time to consider my letter.

Sincerely,

Your name
(Include email and phone number if desired)

Call Your Representative and Senator

Follow the instructions on page 1, "Locate your Representative/Senator", to find your legislator's phone numbers and background information. It is important to make notes prior to your call. Do some research and be prepared with the points you want to make. Have your resources on hand. Some ideas and examples are provided below to get you started and help plan your call. Please remember to represent yourself as an individual voter, not as a representative of NORML or any other organization. You want your message to count individually and to pile up with all the other individual voters who contact this lawmaker, rather than lumped in with the opinions of a group they've already heard from.

You want to represent yourself as a voter, in the elected officials' District. If you would like to learn more about your legislators prior to contacting them, use the instructions on page 1 to review their biography, research Bills they have authored, co-authored, or been supportive of in the past, as well as other relevant information. This will give you a good idea ahead of where they stand on a variety of issues (even if marijuana or drug issues are not covered; look for freedom, environmental, even economic issues). This is also a good place to look when researching incumbent candidates before voting.

Think ahead and plan your call to be relevant to any recent or pending issues in Texas, your community, or those that you feel would strike a chord with the official you are contacting, based on your research. For example, 2015 is a legislative session in Texas, there is sure to be at least two proposed bills regarding marijuana which you can ask your lawmakers where they stand on, request that they support the measures, and what concerns they may have that you can help address. You will almost certainly be speaking to a staff member, not your Representative/Senator personally, but your message will be noted and delivered. Make sure they know that you are a voter, in their District, that you are informed and concerned about these issues. You know that there will be an opportunity for them to show their support and you would like to see them do so, if they do not, you will not support them when they seek re-election.

You can also use some information from your research of the legislator's history. For example, if your Representative has been involved in supporting bills regarding wind and solar energy, they are probably environmentally conscious and you may consider using that insight in your phone call by mentioning the potential benefits of hemp as an alternative resource for multiple uses.

Whatever approach you take, keep your message clear and concise, don't get emotional or discourteous. The person you speak to will be listening and taking your message. That is their job, they will not debate you. The staff member taking your message is an employee who needs to advise their boss of the wants and needs of the voters who put him/her in office. You have legitimate reasons to bring an end to prohibition. Consider your own personal feelings and motivations for marijuana law reform and remember to reference specific instances in your life, such an ill family member who may have benefited/or could have benefited from marijuana, as an example.

Visit Your Representative and Senator's Offices

Follow the instructions on page 1, "Locate your Senator/Representative", for locating your legislator's phone numbers. Call their office and make an appointment to meet with their staff. They will ask what you'd like to discuss and for your complete contact information. Be prepared with this information.

Basics:

1. Dress professionally as though you were going to church or an interview for an office job.
2. Arrive 5-10 minutes early.
3. Have your talking points and notes prepared, including handouts/resource to leave with the office.
4. Consider and ask about some of the concerns your legislator may have regarding the specific type of marijuana legalization you are going to discuss. Have counter points to common misconceptions, in your "back pocket" in case they are brought forth. If you do not have the knowledge or resources to address your Legislators concern, please make note of their concern, do research on the subject and follow up. If you say you will follow up with info, you must do so!

Etiquette Guidelines:

Always

1. Be courteous and respectful without "gushing."
2. Clearly and simply state the purpose of your visit. If it's about a certain bill, identify it correctly.
3. Use specific examples, a personal story, and evidence to support your position.
4. Represent yourself as an individual voter, not as a representative of NORML or any other organization. You want your message to count individually.
5. State what you want done or recommend a course of action.
6. Thank the member or their staff for taking the time to meet with you.
7. When addressing your legislator, address them as "Representative/Senator Last Name."

Never

1. Use vulgarity, profanity, or threats. The first two are just plain rude and the third one can get you a visit from the Secret Service. Simply stated, don't let your passion get in the way of making your point.
2. Say that you will follow up with information and fail to do so. This shows a lack of reliability.