

Malloy proposes decriminalizing pot

NORWALK

By CHASE WRIGHT, Hour Staff Writer

In an effort to cut costs and reduce the size of Connecticut's prison population, Gov. Dannel P. Malloy has proposed decriminalizing possession of marijuana and sentencing certain drunken drivers to house arrest instead of jail.

The governor, who unveiled the details of his 2012-13 budget on Wednesday, is also looking to raise the age of juveniles from 16 to 17, as well as implement a program that allows certain inmates to earn risk reductions credits towards their early release.

The bills, which require legislative approval, were filed Tuesday with the state House and Senate clerks offices, according to Michael Lawlor, Malloy's undersecretary for criminal justice policy and planning.

"Public opinion supports these initiatives," Lawlor said. "I think everyone is interested in saving money and getting better outcomes in the criminal justice system. That is the goal of these bills."

Under Malloy's proposal, offenders caught with less than one ounce of pot would be subject to a \$100 fine instead of incarceration, which is similar to Massachusetts' marijuana law, Lawlor said.

"If you get caught with a couple of joints, you would still get arrested, but it wouldn't be a crime," he said. "It would be like getting a speeding ticket."

Norwalk Police Chief Harry Rilling said he is opposed to the decriminalization of hallucinogenic drugs, including marijuana, which in many cases, he said, can lead to harder drug use.

"I believe that's the first step in the wrong direction," Rilling said of the proposal. "It sends the wrong message to our young people."

Rilling added that Malloy's plan to give the corrections commissioner the discretion to allow certain drunken drivers to serve their sentence at home rather than in jail should be scrutinized by the state legislature.

"I know that our prisons are overcrowded, and certainly the right thing to do is to find alternatives to incarceration," he said, "but when doing that, we have to be very cautious and make sure the decisions we are making are prudent and in the best interest of society."

According to Lawlor, drunken drivers convicted of their second and third offense would still receive the respective three-month and one-year mandatory sentence. However, the corrections commissioner would have the ability to recommend that certain offenders serve their sentence under house arrest.

Offenders would be required to wear a GPS tracking device and undergo mandatory alcohol treatment. And if the offender has his or her driving privileges restored, they must also have their car equipped with

an ignition device that requires them to breath into a sensor that locks when alcohol is detected.

Janice Heggie Margolis, executive director of the Connecticut chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, said her agency supports the house arrest proposal under the above conditions.

"For the people incarcerated right now, treatment is not a component," she said. "Drunk driving is about making changes in behavior."

Ginger Katz, founder of the local anti-drug nonprofit The Courage to Speak Foundation, www.couragetospeak.org, cautioned against easing the consequences for minor drug and alcohol offenses.

"When you let someone off the hook ... that's when you get in trouble. That's when we lose lives and we harm others," she said. "I know it's about saving money, but what comes first, saving lives or saving money?"