

## **Testimony of Shakira Kennedy**

### **NYS Assembly Hearing on Allowing Use of Marijuana October 16, 2018**

Thank you to the New York State Assembly for the opportunity to be here. My name is Shakira Kennedy and I am extremely honored to be here and be heard. I am here to stand up for all the parents who cannot – the downtrodden parents who try to live their lives as best they can, but are continuously beaten down by a system of oppression. I am talking about marijuana prohibition and the abuse Black and Latinx parents face from children's services – and what needs to change.

I am 28 years old, a loving mother, a parent advocate, and a taxpaying citizen. I have a beautiful 7 year-old daughter who goes to one of the top schools in Brooklyn in the Gifted & Talented program. She's also a girl scout.

I recently gave birth to two beautiful twin boys. Unfortunately, I suffered from extreme and prolonged morning sickness during my pregnancy and could not keep food or water down. I sought the best medical care and my doctors told me I needed to gain weight for the health of the fetuses. But all of the medicine they gave me didn't work. Nothing did, until I tried cannabis. Making sure to tell my doctor everything, I disclosed that I used cannabis and it helped me eat normally.

That is when I became a victim of my circumstances. When my twins were born, the hospital drug tested me without telling me. They found marijuana in my system, but not in my children. Still, the hospital called ACS.

I made clear to ACS that I had to use marijuana under these unique circumstances but that I would not continue to use it and asked to schedule a drug test to prove that it would no longer be in my system, but they made me go to court. Then, instead of ongoing drug testing as I requested, I was required to go to an outpatient rehab program three days a week. Again, I do not use drugs or have any addiction, but right out of the hospital I had to attend this program when I should have been healing and bonding with my babies. I had to go to this treatment program for the first three months of my babies' lives – and to bring them because ACS didn't offer me childcare. I was taking a spot in a treatment program that could have gone to somebody who actually needed it.

I had complete strangers from Children's Services coming into my home and telling me what to do as a parent and threatening to remove my children.

I don't even trust giving a credit card at a restaurant, because I worry about ID theft, but I have to give out my children's social security card, birth certificates and doctors' records to this stranger and they could use it for any reason. I have no privacy while ACS is in my children's life. The level of harassment I have received from them is completely unprofessional and overpowering. As a parent, I felt like I was in jail, even though there were no handcuffs on my hands. ACS is like a Correction Officer. They are not trained to solve people's problems.

Before ACS got involved, me and the father of all three of my children were doing well and planning to get married but ACS scared him away, accusing him of “witnessing me smoke marijuana,” and now he is out of contact. He was my support and they ruined that.

I have proven my love and dedication as a parent through my daughter. I always seen the star in her – and done everything for her. I’m a success story. I live for my children.

In the program, I saw that almost everyone was there for marijuana. I do not believe this medicinal plant should be treated as other man-made drugs. It has been proven to help people with mental and physical problems across the globe. Why is it still looked at as a negative drug? Why? Racism and classism. It is the only way to keep the jails packed and to keep the poor poor. You have to go to these mandatory services, and you can lose your job. Programs try to work around your schedule but they can only go so far.

I support full legalization because our crime rates will decrease and there will be less blood in the streets. Drugs will be more safely regulated. Legalization would build up and economically empower the community and reduce wasteful police enforcement. Unless the parent is using marijuana recklessly, this should not be a consideration in family court.

But I see it very clearly: They put the men in jail and sic ACS on the women. Something has to change. This is not right. We need to end marijuana prohibition, repair the harm of the drug war, and reinvest the profits in our communities – MTA funding, drug treatment for people who *actually* need it, and more – and we need to do it now.

I support the Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act for many reasons, but one is that it should end the kind of abuse I have faced from ACS. And as you negotiate over marijuana reform with the Senate and Governor this year, do not forget about parents like me. One day you or someone you love may be harmed and victimized the same way I am. Do not take a step forward and leave us behind. We all deserve justice.

Thank you.