Decriminalizing marijuana effort might be growing
Too many miss out on jobs after minor offense, some legislators say.

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Texans who are arrested for possessing small amounts of marijuana shouldn’t be locked out of jobs and haunted by minor lapses in judgment for the rest of their lives, business and legislative leaders have said.

As acceptance of marijuana — medical and otherwise — grows nationally, and in Texas, members of both major political parties in the Legislature have staked out positions supporting the decriminalization of small amounts of marijuana.

State Rep. Jason Isaac, R-Dripping Springs, told the American-Statesman that too many Texans have missed out on jobs because of criminal records that involve nonviolent drug charges. Isaacs said Texans can get jobs and not face a lifetime with the stigma of a criminal conviction.

“They are branded that way forever, and that should not be the case,” he said.

For Isaacs the issue also has an economic development aspect. He said he has spoken with frustrated managers who cannot hire people with drug convictions, and he has seen applicants turn away because of this.

Isaac not only would like to improve the situation going forward, but he also prefers to pass a bill to help people who already have convictions, he said.

“Ideally, you’d like it to be retroactive,” he said.

More Texans without jobs leads to more dependency on state resources, he said.

“It may make them more dependent on the government,” he said, “and that is the last thing that we want.”

State Rep. Joe Moody, D-El Paso, has been a vocal proponent in the Legislature for decriminalization, and says he intends to push legislation again in 2017.

In 2015, Moody filed a measure to remove criminal penalties for possession of 1 ounce or less of marijuana and make possession a finable offense.

He said he will file the same bill in the coming session. His version includes community service and counseling for arrestees.

Even if decriminalization occurs, companies are under no obligation to ignore tickets for possession of pot, and they still could decide not to hire an applicant based on a marijuana citation.

“Drug convictions and things like this are going to derail them,” Moody said. “If you create an unemployable class of young people, that necessarily would create a negative impact on the economy.

Moody and other lawmakers chasing decriminalization legislation can expect to have a powerful ally in their fight. The Texas Association of Business supports reducing penalties for nonviolent marijuana possession.

“Possession of small amounts of marijuana should be a ticketing offense,” said Bill Hammond, the association’s president and CEO.

It is “ridiculous” to arrest and incarcerate people for minor offenses, he said.

Cathy DeWitt, the association’s vice president of governmental affairs, said minor convictions often prove to be “barriers to employment.”

DeWitt said decriminalization of marijuana possession would lead to a larger pool of potential job candidates.

It is unclear how Gov. Greg Abbott would react to a decriminalization bill, if the Legislature approves one.

A spokesman for Abbott noted recently that the governor said during the 2015 signing of Senate Bill 339, which allowed for the narrow use of a marijuana-derived treatment for epilepsy, that he

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