

Stopping random drug testing is a human rights violation - Sotto

BY MARK MERUEÑAS, GMA News.TV

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MANILA, Philippines - Dangerous Drugs Board (DDB) chairman Vicente Sotto III on Friday expressed disappointment over the Commission on Human Rights' opinion that the planned random drug testing could violate an individual's rights.

During a meeting with education officials on Friday morning, Sotto insisted that the random drug testing – set to be conducted in over 8,000 schools – would not trample any human rights as claimed by various sectors.

"They (CHR) got it completely wrong. The objective of the drug test is not punitive, but preventive. This is a health issue. The students' confidentiality is assured and anyone testing positive can be rescued in time through counseling," Sotto said in a statement.

In fact, Sotto said any attempt to block the implementation of the latest effort against illegal drugs should be the one considered as a violation of human rights.

"Iyong pagpigil sa drug testing, iyon ang violation of human rights dahil pinipigilan mong gamutin ang drug dependence (Preventing drug testing is a violation of human rights because you are preventing the government to cure drug dependence)," Sotto said in a separate radio interview.

"Parang gusto mong pigilin ang pagtigil sa drug dependents at pagtulong sa kanila (It's like stopping efforts to stamp out drug dependence and help drug addicts)," he added.

Sotto gathered officials from the Department of Education, the Commission on Higher Education, and the Technical Education and Skills Development to draw up guidelines in the planned random testing for high school and college students nationwide.

Sotto said they did not invite the CHR to Friday's meeting, but added that the rights body is more than welcome to send a delegate to supervise or contribute ideas in the creation of the guidelines.

He also reiterated during the meeting that the random drug testing could no longer be taken out of the government's intensified anti-drug campaign because it is considered as its most important part.

The measure's significance lies in the fact that it not only involves the "prevention" of drug dependence, but also the government's "intervention" in ensuring that the students would be subjected under counseling to cure them of their addiction.

"Dahil dito ang effect ng random drug testing ay malalaman natin at matutulongan natin sila para makaalis sa drug dependence," Sotto said.

In his statement, Sotto assured transparency in the conduct of the testing, adding that various sectors including the Supreme Court had approved of the measure.

"The student's family will also be alerted about the situation. Those who fear that drug-testing will violate the privacy of students and put them behind bars are mistaken," he said.

"The matter of drug testing was the product of consultation and had been the subject of DDB Resolution No. 6 promulgated since August 1, 2003. Likewise, the Supreme Court, in the case of Social Justice Society vs. DDB promulgated on November 3, 2008, decided that random drug-testing in schools is constitutional," Sotto added.

He also said that passing a drug test has in fact been a requirement for admission in a number of schools in Metro Manila for quite some time now.

The government is slated to carry out the initial stages of the drug testing in March. Then at the start of the school season in June, the government would resume the program for its second installment.

The DepEd earlier said it would expand its random drug testing to include more students and more schools, ultimately targeting to include about 6 million students from 8,000 schools.

For its part, the Department of Health on Thursday suggested that the drug testing which it had been conducting since 2005 should now include the detection of cocaine, Ecstasy, and barbiturates – and not just shabu and marijuana. - **Mark Merueñas, GMA News.TV**