

Marin Voice: Let's not make it easier for kids to get pot

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Adult use of recreational marijuana was legalized in the state of California, effective Jan. 1. While it's true that a majority voted for it, what remains unclear is what that means.

Did residents vote to decriminalize marijuana possession? Destigmatize personal adult use? Support a legal and regulated market? Have retail locations in their town?

Under state law, municipalities have the flexibility to make policies regarding commercial and personal use. While the various towns sort through the regulations, here are a few things to consider:

- What are the implications of having a retail location in your town?
- How much tax revenue will it generate?
- What is the cost of regulation, law enforcement, health care and education?
- What are some of the unintended consequences as it relates to youth?

Some of this is difficult to anticipate, yet we have reports from other communities, data on our local conditions and credible research that makes one thing clear — legalized marijuana is not good for youth. This is what we know:

- Youth use increases as the perception of harm goes down, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. What “normalizing” message could we be sending our youth if storefronts open in town where they gather?
- As perception of harm goes down, so does age of onset. Between 2007 and 2011 the rate of marijuana use among sixth-graders increased by 247 percent, according to a University of Michigan report.
- THC content in marijuana is 10 times higher than it was in the 1960s. From the 1960s to 1990s THC gradually increased from 2 percent to 15 percent. Today, it is around 25 percent, with some products containing 70 percent to 90 percent THC. Anyone over 40 years old who says, “I smoked pot as a teen and I'm OK,” is talking about a completely different marijuana. Corporations are manufacturing products with higher and higher levels of THC and the results bear little resemblance to what is naturally found in the marijuana plant.

- Recent longitudinal studies link marijuana use with higher rates of mental health disorders, such as depression and psychosis — raising concerns about longer-term psychiatric effects with adolescent use, the New England Journal of Medicine reported in 2014.
- The developing teen brain reacts differently to marijuana than a fully developed adult — making youth more vulnerable to long-term consequences and addiction.
- Teens are seeking treatment for marijuana addiction at alarming rates. “Estimates from research suggest that about 9 percent of users become addicted to marijuana; this number increases to about 17 percent among those who start young,” the National Institute on Drug Abuse reported.

As we consider what legalization means for our communities, we want to be mindful of the impact on residents of all ages. We recognize that this can be a difficult subject with potential to divide communities. It’s imperative, however, that we inform ourselves and take part in the public process.

Adults have several ways to access marijuana aside from recreational retail outlets. Delivery for recreational pot is available in most Marin towns, as well as access to medical marijuana and home cultivation. The town of Fairfax has a medical dispensary and, under current regulations, allows up to three.

The policies created now will shape the culture of our towns and the futures of our kids. Getting marijuana in Marin is not difficult for adults. Let’s not make it easier for youth.

Linda Henn is program coordinator for Coalition Connection, a Marin-based community group working to reduce the incidence of underage use of alcohol, marijuana and other drugs.