

My name is Margo Austin. I am the Student Assistance Program (SAP), Counselor at Burlington High School. I am a Licensed Drug and Alcohol Counselor who has worked in schools with youth for over 22 years. I have worked with middle and high school students ranging in age from 11-22. I coordinated the SAP Program through Spectrum Youth and Family Services serving 19 schools as well as doing adolescent treatment. As an SAP Counselor I have the privilege of talking confidentially to many students about drugs. My job is short-term assessment, intervention, support and referral. I meet with students individually, in small groups and in the classroom setting. I provide on-going education to teachers, parents, community members and youth. I served as a member of Health Impact Assessment (HIA) Committee on marijuana legalization headed up by the Department of Health. Full report was completed in January 2016.

I have been asked to testify what impact marijuana has on schools and furthermore what impact legalization may have. Please refer to slides.

Recommendations in the year 2016

- Prioritize the health and wellness of our youth. Adequately fund prevention, intervention and treatment services. We are not doing this right now. Vermont had way more services in schools and communities approximately 5-7 years ago. We were on the right track...lets bring it back!
- Further decriminalization/restorative justice practices
- Offer treatment, intervention and prevention services in every community
- Revenue Sources?? Alcohol? My understanding is the beer tax has not been raised since the 1980's??
- Challenge the misinformation and mixed messaging and glamorization of marijuana. Challenge with on-going education, accurate information that is consistent and not confusing to everyone- smoking cigarettes is "bad" smoking pot="organic"?!
- Challenge the commercialization/marketing of psycho-active substances with a focus on media literacy and effective/well funded Public Service Announcements (PSA's) that are just as "cool and hip" as a Budweiser ad! The alcohol and tobacco industry spend millions on ads....why? Because they work!
- Implement research based prevention curriculum K-12 delivered to all students
- ACT 51 teacher training reinstate more than 1 "optional" on line training manual
- Comprehensive Parent Education
- Effective/cool Public Service Announcements (PSA's) to impact a skewed perception of harm for marijuana
- Trained, well supported, funded SAP Counselors in every middle and high school in Vermont
- State wide prevention coalitions for youth to join like VTLSP/SADD
- State wide youth leadership Conference that glamorize healthy choices by youth

I also would like to briefly address what I hear as the “myth of inevitability. “ I am concerned about a sentiment that explains our need to do this in Vermont because our surrounding neighbors Canada and Massachusetts might legalize as well. In MA, the Republican Gov, Charlie Baker, and Dem AG, Maura Healey, along with Boston Mayor Marty Walsh are throwing their names against the initiative. Every major health group that has chimed in so far is against it. So this is far from inevitable. Secondly, in Canada, they've been talking about it for a while but it isn't anywhere near happening -- and questions are emerging about whether or not it is happening at all anymore. They've found it's much harder to implement than previously thought. For a state that prides itself on being independent and doing what's best for Vermonters this thinking is not in line. Here we are the first state to pass the GMO bill and risk being sued because we felt it was right for Vermonters health and safety. Furthermore, if this is such a successful policy, why hasn't any state that border Colorado legalized?

In closing, I would ask the committee members to deeply consider the current challenges we already face managing the two legal “recreational” drugs we have. When we gain **\$1 in tax revenue for every \$10** we spend dealing with the real costs to society with alcohol and tobacco we are set up to fail.

Addiction is a disease that begins in adolescence. The decision to legalize another psycho-active drug must be done with the vision it will **better the next generation of youth.**

Nothing in my 22 years of addiction training and experience in the field with youth, makes me believe we will reach that goal through legalization.

I know we all care so much for this special state we call home Vermont. I appreciate that these issues are incredibly complex which is why I would urge you to take your time and **do not rush to legalize another addictive, psycho-active substance.** I know we all want what is best for Vermont youth and adults when it comes to health and safety!

Thank you!

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