

Burlington Free Press Article / Vermont Association of Chiefs of Police

Recent months have highlighted a variety of challenges that face 21st century policing. As the pace of change continues to accelerate and demands on contemporary police officers continues to increase, it is more important now than ever that communities be actively engaged in discussions regarding public safety and health.

Drug trafficking and abuse affects every facet of life in Vermont, from the negative image it has presented to those that wish to visit, live or invest in our state to the tremendous burden it places on families struggling to save a loved one or friend from addiction. Vermonters are more concerned about their personal safety and the security of their homes and businesses more now than ever before. Every night on the evening news we hear of the occurrence of burglaries, armed robberies, assaults or drug arrests that have occurred throughout our state. Social services are taxed beyond the breaking point. The requests for counseling and treatment and the number of homeless Vermonters, increase at an unsustainable rate. Illegal drug use and trafficking continues to increase at an alarming pace, despite our best efforts.

With our current state budget at a deficit in the estimated amount of one hundred million dollars, it does not look like there will be much, if any, state funding to increase the current level of effort in the campaign to fight drug trafficking. We know we must continually increase the pressure on drug traffickers that bring their deadly poison into our state while simultaneously handling this crisis as one that exists as much in the realm of public health as it does public safety.

As Vermonters continue to struggle with the opiate epidemic, some now are proposing the legalization of marijuana. Legalization of marijuana poses an enormous challenge for law enforcement at a time we are struggling to address opiate addiction and trafficking. More importantly, legalization will pose an even bigger challenge to social service agencies already overwhelmed with challenges from substance abuse. We oppose this bill.

Much of the rationale for the legalization of marijuana comes in the form of misinformation. The following are some of the myths and facts surrounding marijuana:

Myth: Marijuana cases are overwhelming our courts and result in putting people in jail for minor crimes.

Fact: There is no one incarcerated in the state of Vermont for the possession of marijuana exclusively.

Myth: Local and state law enforcement money is spent fighting “a war on drugs” that includes marijuana.

Fact: We need more money for “a war on drugs” coming from the legislative process. State taxes pay little for core local law enforcement operations in Vermont. There are no departments in the state that prioritize marijuana enforcement in any way.

Myth: We can simply regulate and tax the sale of marijuana to make money.

Follow-up questions to those who represent the regulation and taxation myth:

Have we successfully regulated prescription medications, whose illicit usage is also contributing to the tearing apart of our communities?

Have we been able to prevent alcoholic beverages from reaching the hands of children?

Are we really so naïve to think parents will be able to prevent their children from gaining access to marijuana if it is legalized?

Will adults be responsible enough to not smoke marijuana around their children or not operate a motor vehicle while under the influence of marijuana?

Other concerns:

If marijuana is legalized, it takes the flexibility away from state's attorneys to mandate drug counseling for young, first-time offenders.

Most police officers are trained to detect alcohol impairment, but are not as proficient with impairment due to drugs. There are currently no mechanical road side tests for marijuana that have passed judicial review as there are for determining the level of alcohol consumption.

Vermont ranks first in the nation per capita for marijuana use amongst 18-25 year olds according to a Vermont Department of Health article regarding marijuana usage. Medical research is clear that marijuana usage poses serious health hazards to both adolescents and adults.

Motor vehicle fatalities involving the usage of marijuana currently exceeds those involving alcohol at a three to one ratio according to the Vermont Department of Motor Vehicles and the Vermont Governor's Highway Safety Program.

Along with the enormous challenges that illegal drugs present, we have identified a number of other legislative issues that are of concern to law enforcement such as:

Continuously increasing burdens on police to intervene with persons suffering from severe and persistent mental health issues, coupled with woefully inadequate treatment resources and supportive / structured housing for those with mental health issues.

Implementation of the usage of body cameras and the policies addressing the usage of them, the purchase of equipment, funding for sustainment beyond the initial purchase to include data storage and maintenance.

The H: 765 bill which addresses the levels of certification and scope of duties for less than full-time certified officers.

The proposal to dissolve the independent board governing E911 and the loss of decision making by representatives of local police, fire and rescue agencies has caused concern. We oppose this initiative.

The bill recommending the restriction of acquisition and usage of military surplus equipment by law enforcement agencies does not acknowledge the fact that dangers to law enforcement officers are greater now than ever. The number of law enforcement fatalities has increased by 24% in 2014 with 126 officers killed in the line of duty. We oppose this bill.

Our many thanks go out to those of you who continue to work with us and support our efforts to keep your communities safe.

Vergennes Chief of Police George P. Merkel

President / Vermont Association of Chiefs of Police