

Like many people who have been concerned about the public health effects of legalized marijuana, my reaction to seeing another legalization bill in the very next session was, “Why are we doing this all over again?” The answer I got from some people was that things have changed in just one year. Indeed they have, but in addition to Massachusetts and Maine legalizing marijuana, it is important to remember some other recent developments.

1. One of the largest substance abuse treatment centers in the state just closed. Meanwhile, record numbers of Vermonters in need of psychiatric and substance abuse services are languishing in ERs because a lack of available care. With most experts suggesting that legalizing marijuana will only increase the demand for these services, does this really feel like the right time to do this?
2. One of the most horrific and tragic car crashes occurred this past October that claimed the lives of 5 high school students. Local NBC news reported last month that the toxicology report showed significant amounts of THC in the driver’s blood and that close contacts were concerned about this person’s dependence on marijuana. As the details of this case slowly come to light, does this really feel like the right time to do this?
3. Perhaps the most comprehensive study to date on the effects of legalized marijuana on youth was published last December. In a detailed comparison of youth cannabis use in residents of Washington and Colorado versus neighboring states that have not legalized cannabis, the conclusions were as clear as mud. It looks like legalization increased youth use in Washington but not in Colorado. Given the uncertainty surrounding the scientific evidence regarding the effect of legalization on youth, does this really feel like the right time to do this?

We are not in 6th grade anymore, and don’t have to do things just because other states are doing them. Last year, our legislature weighed the evidence and concluded that it didn’t make sense to plunge into a decision that would be nearly impossible to take back. In my view, very little has changed since then, and our state has much more pressing issues right now to occupy our time and energy.

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