

Central Vermont New Directions Coalition
SAM-VT
Ginny Burley, Prevention Specialist
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Last week, proponents of recreational marijuana put forth yet another proposal. House Bill 170 would legalize possession of two ounces of marijuana and allow home-growers to raise nine plants at a time, two mature and seven immature. The bill also deals with some overlooked issues in Vermont's decriminalization law.

We are encouraged that the bill specifically outlaws the manufacture of concentrates and does not try to create a commercial retail marijuana industry in Vermont, with all the downsides that would cause. What Vermont doesn't need is another Big Tobacco.

On the other hand, the bill is far from perfect. Given how many joints you can roll from two ounces (over a hundred) and how many pounds of dried leaf and bud you can harvest from just one mature plant (one to five, depending on how green your thumb is), we could argue that the bill goes too far. After all, Vermont's decriminalization law applies to one ounce, not two. But that's not H.170's biggest flaw.

Rep. Maxine Grad, D-Moretown – chair of the House Judiciary Committee and one of H.170's sponsors – is quoted in VT Digger as stating, "If we want to reduce use, the best way is through education." We couldn't agree more.

Yet H.170 says nothing about education to decrease marijuana use. Education to prevent drug use and abuse is not cheap, but it is far less expensive than the results we can expect if we fail to ramp up prevention.

Marijuana use among 18-25 year-olds went up in Washington, D.C. when it legalized home-grows and possession of small amounts but not retail sales. In Colorado, retail stores didn't open until the first day of 2014, but home-grows and possession became legal on the first day of 2013. In that first legal year, Colorado's use rate jumped from sixth to first in the nation, in all age groups, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health.

Increased use rates result in a number of increased harms. The Health Impact Assessment released last year by the Vermont Department of Health outlined them clearly, and those findings were mostly confirmed last month in a new report from the National Institutes of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. We can expect to see increases in rates of addiction and abuse, psychosis and schizophrenia, suicide, and traffic fatalities, to list just the most likely.

In Colorado, traffic accidents, suicides, and cases of temporary psychotic breaks spiked in 2013-14. Washington, DC saw less extreme results, and that would be cause for hope if a similar bill passed here in Vermont. But if nothing is done to reduce use rates, the cases of all associated harms will grow slowly but surely. Our

emergency rooms, addiction treatment centers, mental health facilities, and family service programs are already overloaded.

We hear that Vermont is broke, but we could raise the excise tax on alcohol. It hasn't been raised in decades and would increase the cost of a single drink by pennies. Or our legislators could stop raiding the Tobacco Fund for unrelated projects and instead divert money into marijuana use prevention. Given that most marijuana users also use tobacco, this makes some sense.

If Rep. Grad and her cosponsors are so intent on legalizing marijuana and truly believe that education is the best way to reduce use, they need to bite the bullet and find a way to fund an education program as part of their bill. To be most effective, the education should begin before possession and home-grows become legal. It should address the entire community: teens, young adults, and adults. It should have a goal: a low use rate to be reached before legalization begins.

And even when that goal is reached, we should take the time to resurvey the effects of legalization in other states, to see if it really makes more sense than decriminalization.