

*April 6, 2019*

*House Government Operations Committee  
Statehouse  
Montpelier, VT 05602*

Dear Members of the House Government Operations Committee,

I am writing to you as you consider legislation regarding how the state will deal with the sale of marijuana in Vermont (S.54). I believe it is imperative that **future marijuana legislation must include designating funds to provide parent and youth education about the fact that marijuana use by teens/young adults can lead to increased rates of serious mental illness.** If you are considering a tax of 16%, it could be mandated that 2 % of the revenue generated be used for educational outreach geared to youth and adults who work and care for youth (teachers, parents, coaches, etc) so that when choices are made about marijuana, they can be educated ones. The risks of alcohol, tobacco and other substances are widely known, but marijuana is often considered “safe”.

I am a parent who has raised three teens in Vermont. As a secondary school teacher and a youth program leader here in Vermont, I am very aware of teen and parent/adult perceptions of marijuana here. Vermonters by an overwhelming margin think pot is harmless. Raising the possibility that marijuana could have negative impacts on the mental health of some individuals elicits the response that people “have used for years and are fine”. Today’s marijuana is not the same as what was available years ago; the level of THC is significantly higher, the impact on the brain much more intense. Marijuana can be a real risk for vulnerable members of our population who may choose to self medicate thinking that marijuana is a harmless way to relax.

**Studies in Europe have found that there is a 9-13% increased rate of serious mental illness in young people who have been regular/heavy marijuana users.** A psychiatry resident at UVM told me “research suggests that prolonged and early exposure to cannabis may result in long-term psychotic illness that otherwise wouldn’t have occurred”. Adolescents and young adults’ brains are still growing until the age of 25 and they can be particularly impacted by heavy marijuana use.. Rates of psychotic illness (including bipolar disorder and schizophrenia) are increased in youth who use pot regularly compared to those who abstain. Bipolar rates have increased exponentially along with an increase in the level of THC in marijuana that is widely available. As the parent of two young adults with bipolar disorder and as a person who spent five years as a social service professional working with youth with mental illness, I have done years of research on this issue trying to understand causes.

I have been trained by NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) as a teacher in their 12 week mental illness course for family members (Family to Family) and as a family support group facilitator. I also served as Chair of the Vermont State NAMI Conference while serving on their Board. I have spoken with hundreds of family members and with individuals living with mental illness. Many of them believe that marijuana played a contributing role in their own or their family members’ challenges.

The development of mental illness usually does not have only one cause. It is believed to be caused by a combination of genetic predisposition and environmental factors which can include stress and/or substance use. Not every person who experiences trauma develops PTSD, and not every person who smokes a lot of pot becomes mentally ill, but there appears to be a connection and it would be both wise and compassionate to help prevent mental illness by helping youth and the adults who guide them to understand risks. It could also save literally millions in ER, hospitalization and other costs that result from psychotic illness. Young people and those who care about them in Vermont need to learn more about marijuana and its possible impacts on mental health, as it becomes more available in our state in various forms.

I believe an important aspect of any cannabis legislation should be to include funds for education to help youth and parents understand that marijuana can cause increased rates of serious mental health.

The state has chosen to move forward with legalization. The next responsible step would be to mandate funds that guarantee our children and adults will be educated about the risks that can come with marijuana use.

Sincerely,  
Resident of Westminster, VT

While there are many articles both from the popular media and from scholarly research about the issue of marijuana and mental illness, this link from the Denver public health office which explains clearly some of the problems might be helpful for you to review:

[Denver Study](#)

Here is the link to an article I wrote about marijuana and mental illness in The Commons:

[Commons article](#)