

To: House Government Operations Committee
From: Mariah Flynn (Sanderson), Coalition Director at Burlington Partnership for a Healthy Community
Date: April 30th, 2026
RE: S.278, public health considerations

Hello, thank you for the invitation to speak with you all today. My name is Mariah Flynn (she/her), I am a Certified Prevention Specialist and I work as the Coalition Director for the Burlington Partnership for a Healthy Community, a substance misuse prevention coalition that serves Burlington. [reference to slide #1] My work is in implementing strategies that help prevent folks from developing a substance use disorder. We do that in a lot of different ways - through supporting education, improving community design, increasing community connection - basically our goal is to help make it easier for people to make informed and healthy choices about substance use.

I spend a lot of my time looking at data and emerging research about cannabis. I've been interested and involved in Vermont's conversations and policy changes about cannabis for a long time - and one of the reasons I pay particular attention to cannabis is that in Burlington where I work and in my general conversations with folks in VT, cannabis continues to be the substance where I most often see the biggest disconnect between what we have learned in the last 10-15 years from the research and what the public understanding or knowledge is about the substance. People's understanding of cannabis has not yet caught up to the science.

I reached out to the Senate back in February about my concerns with the bill as it was initially introduced, because I was worried about the negative public health impacts, particularly on young people. It has been heartening to see how this bill has progressed and improved over time. I want to commend those who recognized some of the initial proposals in the bill to reduce regulations was not in the best interest of the public. As someone who works in substance use prevention I was very concerned that this bill initially read like a marketing strategy for cannabis. Some of the things I was most concerned about - the reduced advertising restrictions, the increased potency, the reduced taxes, and removing the community's voice to opt in to local sales - have been removed and I appreciate the recognition that these were not in the best interest of the public and they have been removed.

There are still things in the bill that are of concern, but in the interest of time I'll just focus on two points relevant to my field that I hope you'll consider.

The first is that Vermont has the [highest reported use of cannabis in the nation](#) (National Survey on Drug Use and Health) and when broken out by demographics we also have one of the highest rates of use in the US among our youth and young adults. This is an area that we do not want to be number 1 in. Because young brains that are still developing they are much more susceptible to developing an addiction or a substance use disorder. We do not need policies to focus on giving more access to cannabis - with things like increased purchase limits and product

sizes and events where people are using in public. **What we really need in VT right now are strategies that acknowledge that our high cannabis use rates are a problem and work to address it.**

We need a well-funded public health campaign to educate Vermonters about the health risks of cannabis so that we can help people catch up to the science.

We need policies that work further upstream and put up more guardrails so that so many people do not keep falling into the river of addiction and needing more intensive resources downstream.

The second consideration is that adult focused policies have an impact on youth. I think partially because cannabis commercialization in VT started during a pandemic, we are *still* learning about all the ways that VT's current cannabis laws are impacting Burlington and our youth. One thing I have heard from my partners in the counseling department of our Burlington schools is that kids still have a lot of confusion about cannabis and they are getting a lot of mixed messages about it because they are seeing it normalized even more as part of the community. Because nicotine vaping products also became so accessible and prolific at the same time as cannabis legalization in VT we are seeing in our schools an interchanging of cannabis and nicotine vaping and product use by youth and some kids who are progressing in the addiction cycle much faster than we used to see in the past.

[SLIDE #2] We work with our school district to implement a survey every two years in the middle and high schools. On one of the questions we ask students about a list of 19 different issues that could impact a young person's life. We ask students to rank them as either "A big concern," "somewhat of a concern." or "not at all a concern" for young people in their school or in Burlington. On the screen are a list, in order of the issues that ranked the most often as a big concern in 2023 and in 2025 for middle and high schoolers in Burlington. You'll see that vaping continues to rank in the top three concerns across all grade levels for both years. What we saw that was new last year is that cannabis or marijuana use also joined in the top as one of the issues they saw as most concerning. Which is something to pay attention to.

Right now I'm working with my partners at the Burlington school district to bring parents together for an urgent meeting because there are concerning rates of cannabis and alcohol use in a particular lower grade at the high school - and we want to get us all talking about how to wrap them with support. This is all to say that I urge legislators to slow down and be very thoughtful about how quickly Vermont pushes to increase access to more and more cannabis, which is what I see in this bill. We are still learning about all the ways the current access may be negatively impacting our most vulnerable Vermonters and we need more help to address that first.

[SLIDE #3] This is Lienna. Lienna is a 9th grader now at Burlington high school but she took these pictures last year when she was an 8th grader at Edmunds Middle School. She wanted to show what images she walks by on her way to and from school and when she is out in her

community. In just this one block of church Street Lienna is walking down (pic on left) she is walking by 3 cannabis shops and 2 bars.

This visual sign of normalization of substance use tells her what the adults in her community value as important. Before considering policies that potentially continue to add those high cannabis use rates in VT that I mentioned earlier by offering more public places to use cannabis and bigger purchase limits and product size - I urge us to instead work on how we can improve the public understanding of the health risks of use. Consider how the current landscape is impacting young people and normalizing cannabis use for the next generation. For Lienna's generation the cannabis available has a lot higher potency than previous generations and use carries a lot more potential short and long term risks. Lienna and other kids need it to be just as easy to access good information and a healthy community as it is for adults to get more and more cannabis.

I appreciate your time today.

RESOURCES FOR GOOD POLICY RESEARCH ON CANNABIS

International Cannabis Policy Study: cannabisproject.ca

Getting it Right From the Start: gettingitrightfromthestart.org