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## Marijuana Facts and Washington State

In his opinion piece published in the *Seattle Times* (“Marijuana’s true potency and why the law should change”, 9/3/10), John McKay writes that “Federal criminal law should give way to regulation. . . . like (that) guarding that other commodity that failed miserably at prohibition, alcohol.” In referencing alcohol prohibition, Mr. McKay neglects to recognize one of the actual benefits of the policy: per capita consumption of alcohol dropped precipitously following enactment, and did not rise back to pre-prohibition levels until the 1970’s. Countless lives and resources were saved as a result. Currently, many youth and adults have not tried and do not smoke marijuana simply because it is illegal. Consider the analogous and significant change in behavior throughout the country when driving without a seat belt became illegal – a change that did not previously occur in spite of numerous public education and campaigns.

Mr. McKay also disregards or completely overlooks several aspects of marijuana prohibition. Legalizing marijuana will undoubtedly increase its availability. When considering the risk factors associated with the initiation and continued use of psychoactive substances, the availability of such substances in the community is pre-eminent. Further, he simply does not address the fact that marijuana is not a benign substance – it is, in fact, a drug on which users develop dependence. Nationally, the number of regular marijuana users is estimated to be approximately 15 million (compared to 126 million alcohol consumers), of whom it is estimated 4 million, or nearly 30%, are dependent on the drug and would benefit from participating in an abstinence-based treatment program.

According to a University of Washington report analyzing drug abuse trends in Seattle/King County during 2009, the number and rate of treatment admissions among adults for marijuana dependence has more than doubled since 1999, rising from 920 to 1,715. Marijuana is given as the reason for one in three adolescent crisis calls to the Alcohol/Drug Help Line, and marijuana-related treatment admissions among adolescents far exceed those for any other psychoactive substance, numbering 971 in 2009 – compared to 489 for alcohol dependence and no more than 35 for any other drug. In addition, marijuana ranked 4<sup>th</sup> as the cause for drug-related emergency room visits in Seattle/King County, trailing only alcohol, opioids and cocaine.

On a statewide basis, the picture looks the same. The Washington State Healthy Youth Survey, administered biennially to state public school students, indicates that marijuana use in the past 30 days among Washington State students continues to increase and remains significantly above the national rate. In 2008 (the most recent year for which data is available) 8.3% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders, 19.1% of 10<sup>th</sup> graders and 23.4% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders reported recent use. According to the Washington State Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery, marijuana dependence accounted

for 62% of the youth admissions to state treatment programs – compared to 23% for alcohol dependence and no more than 6% for any other substance. In addition, a total of 4,069 youth entered treatment for marijuana dependence statewide in 2008, a rate of 258 admissions per 100,000 population indicating significant incidence and prevalence. With regard to Washington State adults, the number and rate of treatment admissions for marijuana dependence increased approximately 50% from 2003 through 2008, from 3,833 (63 per 100,000 population) to 5,662 (113 per 100,000 population). And, the Washington State Patrol reports that an unprecedented – and increasing – number of drivers are being cited for driving under the influence of marijuana.

Further, marijuana cultivation in Washington State has also reached an all-time high with Drug Trafficking Organizations dominating both indoor and outdoor growing as well as distribution. Last year Washington State ranked second in the nation, following only California, for marijuana production. Consequently, public lands -- including our national and state parks, forests and wildlife preserves -- as well as native reservations are suffering severe damage due to illegal hunting, the clearing and terracing of land and diversion of streams, the use of dangerous pesticides and fertilizers, and the dumping of vast amounts of trash. The individuals tending these growing operations are also well armed and are a threat to whoever they encounter.

The Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, Gil Kerlikowske, has spoken out clearly on the subject of marijuana regulation and legalization, stating that “the concern with marijuana is not born out of any culture war mentality but out of what the science tells us about the drug’s effects: marijuana use is harmful”.

Advocates of legalization say the costs of prohibition – mainly through the criminal justice system – place a great burden on taxpayers and governments. While there are certainly costs for current prohibitions, legalizing marijuana would not significantly cut the costs of the criminal justice system. Arrests for alcohol-related crimes such as violations of liquor laws and driving under the influence totaled nearly **2.7 million** in 2008 while marijuana-related arrests totaled around **750,000** in the same year.

Controls and prohibitions help to keep prices higher, and higher prices help keep use rates relatively low, since drug use, especially among young people, is known to be sensitive to price. Legalization means the price comes down, the number of users goes up, the underground market adapts, and the revenue gained through a regulated market will never keep pace with the financial and social cost of making this drug more accessible.

Our national strategy recognizes that the most promising drug policy is one that prevents drug use in the first place. We have many proven methods for reducing the demand for drugs. The demand can be decreased with comprehensive, evidence-based prevention programs focused on adolescence, which science confirms is the peak period for drug-use initiation and the potential for addiction. Our young people must be made aware of the risks of drug use – at home, in school, in sports leagues, in faith communities, in places of work, and in other settings and activities that attract youth. This is vital because an individual who reaches age 21 without smoking, using drugs or abusing alcohol is virtually certain never to do so.

A balanced approach based on a combination of public health and public safety strategies is the surest route to reducing drug use and its consequences. This approach employs best practices in

prevention, treatment, and law enforcement with community partners. We know that working together has resulted in lowering crime and drug use.

John McKay was an excellent U.S. Attorney and is well respected by law enforcement -- but on this issue he is misinformed.

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