



September 15, 2014

On behalf of our membership, the Alaska Peace Officers Association (APOA) State Board writes this letter in opposition to the legalization of marijuana. We offer our take on the legalization of marijuana's impacts to Alaska financially, medically, and from a societal impact. Then we will provide an overview of issues that have arisen in Colorado.

There is a fiscal impact to law enforcement, the health care system, and the economy. Law enforcement will require additional training for marijuana related offenses (driving under the influence of marijuana) and underage marijuana use. The Alaska Association of Chiefs of Police conducted a study in 2014 that estimated a cost of \$6,000,000.00 that will be needed for Alaska law enforcement agencies to contend with issues arising from legalization. Legalization of marijuana can cause an increase in marijuana-related traffic crashes, including fatalities, which will have financial consequences on users as well as non-users and their families. Because marijuana use among people under 21 would still be illegal, the anticipated increase in marijuana use in teenagers will have a direct impact on the case loads in the juvenile justice and court systems.

Medically, accidental poisonings of young children by ingesting marijuana edibles will increase and have a significant impact on the health care industry as will other associated ailments from adult use. Stephanie Watson wrote in an article for WebMD that marijuana smoke is also filled with many of the same chemicals as tobacco smoke, including ammonia, hydrogen cyanide, and formaldehyde. Some of these chemicals are known to cause cancer. Victims of traffic accidents involving drivers testing positive for marijuana can not only have their family finances negatively impacted, but there can also be concomitant effects on the workforce through medical-related absence. Marijuana THC levels have increased from the 1%-3% of the Mexican grown marijuana common in the 1970's to well over 40%. When marijuana is made into edibles, it takes the body longer to digest it causing users accustomed to the more instant "high" of smoking the product to overdose on marijuana. Signs of overdose can include sudden anxiety and panic and, in extreme cases, has caused episodes of erratic behavior, dissociation, and psychosis.

There is a societal impact as well. The initiative does not address possession or use of marijuana by persons under 21; it only states someone under 21 cannot buy or attempt to buy marijuana or accessories. Laws would need to address the transfer of marijuana from an adult to someone under 21. The initiative does not address use of marijuana in private where children are present.

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Unlike alcohol, marijuana use in the home risks second hand smoke ingestion by children by their mere presence in the home. Alaska would also have to construct laws addressing a presumptive level of marijuana deemed to cause a driver to be impaired as well as an approved method of determining that level. Because marijuana metabolizes differently than alcohol in the body, this may lead to more legal challenges of impairment for those cases.

Colorado's experience with marijuana provides insight into what can be expected if Alaska follows their lead. Their recreational legalization does not have enough data yet to be useful; however, Colorado's experience with a large medical marijuana user group leaves little doubt of its negative effect. In 2000, Colorado authorized limited medical marijuana legalization where one "caregiver" could service up to 5 medical marijuana patients. By the end of 2009, there were approximately 6,000 cardholders for medical marijuana. In 2010, Colorado's law changed allowing for unlimited numbers of patients for each caregiver. The same year, Colorado legalized marijuana dispensaries, cultivation centers, and manufacturers of edible products. By 2012, there were 532 licensed dispensaries and 108,000 registered patients, 94% of whom qualified for a card because of "severe pain." In 2012, Colorado approved the process for legalization of recreational marijuana.

Traffic fatalities in general in Colorado decreased between 2006 and 2011 like it did in much of the country. In Colorado, the decrease was 16%. However, during that same period, Colorado traffic **fatalities** in which the driver tested positive for marijuana **increased 114%**. In 2011, drivers testing positive for marijuana were involved in **56% of fatal vehicle crashes** involving drugs. These numbers were prior to recreational legalization.

Although their current law legalizing marijuana applies only to people 21 and over, Colorado, like Alaska, already had a significant problem with youth marijuana consumption. According to *Marijuana Use by Young People: The Impact of State Medical Marijuana Laws* by Karen O'Keefe, in Alaska in 2009, the number of students between 12 and 17 surveyed that claimed they used marijuana in their lifetime was 44.5%. Colorado ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the nation in marijuana use among youth in 2011. Detected THC levels in students who were tested in the Colorado Springs High School referrals increased by 76% after 2009, with the average THC level quantified at **396 nanograms**. That figure was provided by Conspire, a Colorado drug testing company. Colorado has a presumptive level of **5 nanograms** for Driving While Impaired.

In 2006, Colorado reported no patients younger than 12 were treated for marijuana ingestion. However, between 2009 and 2011, 588 children under 12 were admitted to the emergency rooms for unintentional ingestions, 14 of which were for marijuana exposure of which 7 of the exposures were from marijuana-infused food products.

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Marijuana-related exposures for children ages 0-5 increased 200% to 12 per year from the 4 per year in the early years of medical marijuana availability, 2006-2008.

We should learn from the experiences in Colorado and Washington prior to authorizing wider use of a dangerous substance. The Colorado legislation legalizing recreational marijuana use included ongoing studies to determine many facets of the legislation's effect including whether tax revenue generated was greater than the cost to the state for additional services, public safety costs, and increased burdens on the legal system, particularly in the realm of impaired drivers.

The argument in Alaska for legalization compares the use of marijuana to alcohol. It is not an equal comparison. They argue that income to the State from the taxation of marijuana will offset any costs of public safety. Legalizing marijuana will not stop the black market trade of marijuana. Black market sellers will not have to pay the tax and will adjust their pricing to be less than that products from dispensaries. The costs to our society will greatly exceed income from the taxes paid by those who choose to purchase it legally. The APOA State Board is against the legalization of marijuana and urges voters to make an informed decision.

Sincerely,

Brad Johnson  
APOA State Chapter President

*About APOA*

*The Alaska Peace Officers Association (APOA) is a dynamic, professional and fraternal organization. Our membership consists of law enforcement, corrections, prosecutors, security professionals and others at the local, state and federal levels. APOA represents peace officers and their issues and has done so for over half a century. We are one of the oldest and largest nonprofit associations in the state. APOA is a 501c(3) charitable, non-profit organization. Donations to APOA are fully tax deductible.*

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