

## OP-ED: GOV. MURPHY IGNORES DOWNSIDE OF LEGALIZED POT

INDRA CIDAMBI | FEBRUARY 7, 2018

The governor's campaign promises notwithstanding, hard evidence shows that decriminalization rather than legalization is the smart policy



*Indra Cidambi*

As an addiction medicine specialist and psychiatrist on the front lines dealing with New Jersey's growing drug epidemic, it is my responsibility to speak up against Gov. Phil Murphy's plans to fast track the legalization of marijuana.

The governor is ignoring the downside of legalizing marijuana – not only from a medical standpoint, but also from the negative impact on society. This act of potentially legalizing marijuana displays an indifference to the health and safety of his constituents. Besides the drug's negative impact on brain

development in children, evidence from Colorado suggests legalizing marijuana will sharply increase marijuana use, and cause crime rates to increase along with fatal car accidents. Additionally, it will not bring down the use of illicit drugs.

It is important for families to know that marijuana is not only addictive, but also affects brain development. This will substantially hurt our teenagers' and young adults' ability to achieve their potential at school and in life. Chronic usage of the drug can also cause long-lasting changes to the brain's reward system, opening up the pathways that often lead to experimenting with other, more addictive drugs. Of even more concern is the fact that legalizing marijuana will send mixed messages about the acceptance of using drugs for recreational purposes, a trend we do not want to encourage while our state struggles with a drug epidemic.

### Cold facts

According to statistics from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), roughly four million Americans use marijuana or are dependent on the drug. Nearly one in three individuals who used marijuana may have some degree of marijuana use disorder and nearly one in 10 of marijuana users will become addicted. Experimentation with marijuana begins early as well. Research conducted by the University of Michigan shows 80 percent of eighth graders and one-third of 12th graders have used marijuana at least once over the past year. Studies have noted that greater than 40 percent of adults have tried marijuana at least once.

Also, consider this 2016 statistic from Quest Diagnostics on drug testing of the U.S. workforce. Marijuana positivity increased nearly 75 percent, from 5.1 percent in 2013 to 8.9 percent in 2016 in the general U.S. workforce. For the first time since recreational marijuana use was legalized in Colorado and Washington, failed drug tests in those states outpaced the national average. When calling for legalization of marijuana, would the governor also propose that an employee who tests positive for marijuana be allowed to continue to work?

The statistics from Colorado are disheartening:

- Marijuana use among the 18-25 age group rose to 33 percent from 28 percent, 2012-2014, and among the 26 and over age group it rose to 12.4 percent from 7.6 percent.
- Use of illicit drugs has not gone down — heroin-related overdose deaths rose 93 percent from 2013 to 228 (according to the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment) in 2016 (comparable national statistics not yet available).
- Crime rate increased 3.4 percent in 2016, versus the national average of 0.3 percent; car thefts jumped 22 percent.
- Fatal auto crashes increased 40 percent from 2013 to 2016, with drivers involved in these crashes testing positive for marijuana increasing 145 percent in the same period.
- After retail marijuana sales began in Colorado, the increase in collision-claim frequency was 14 percent higher than nearby Nebraska, Utah, and Wyoming.

What's the plan?

So what should New Jersey do instead? In my opinion, the governor should focus on decriminalization of drug-related violations (for possession) rather than on legalization of marijuana. It will help individuals in recovery to more easily reintegrate into the job market after successful completion of treatment. Decriminalization also saves the state money that could be reallocated to fund prevention and treatment initiatives. Consider the following fact:

- In 2015, there were roughly 1.5 million arrests for drug-law violations in the U.S. and four out of five were for possession.
- Decriminalization of drug-possession-related violations may offer the biggest bang for the buck because, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, more than 50 percent of the costs tied to illicit drug use are related to criminal justice and incarceration.

It is time we utilize the “token economy” treatment model that universally offers individuals a clean record upon successful completion of addiction treatment. This would cut criminal justice costs dramatically and also enable those in recovery to more easily reintegrate into the job market.

Given the serious consequences of legalizing marijuana, it is my responsibility as an addiction specialist to sound the alarm and hope that New Jersey politicians rethink their push to legalize the drug and focus on decriminalization instead.

Indra Cidambi, M.D., is a leading expert and pioneer in the field of addiction medicine. She founded the Center for Network Therapy (CNT), New Jersey's first state-licensed ambulatory (outpatient) detoxification treatment facility, and currently serves as its medical director.