

October 25, 2017

To: Saint Louis City Board of Aldermen
From: Howard Weissman, Executive Director
Re: Marijuana Legalization in the City of Saint Louis

Dear President Reed and Members of the Board of Aldermen:

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I'm writing to express our concerns about the proposed ordinance to effectively legalize marijuana possession and sale in the City of St. Louis.

As you know, your body decriminalized marijuana in 2013, making the penalty for possession of small amounts of cannabis no more serious than a traffic ticket. Since decriminalization, enforcement of marijuana laws has occupied very little of St. Louis Metropolitan Police time and the number of citations issued has remained very low.

Moving from decriminalization to legalization creates a host of unintended consequences and does not reduce the importance of law enforcement. Of greater concern, the proposed initiative enables the creation of retail marijuana sales, which means opening the door to the commercialization of a third legal, addictive substance.

While the opioid epidemic justifiably receives a great deal of attention, it's worth remembering that alcohol kills more of us than heroin, prescription opioids and all other illegal drugs combined.

This is not just that alcohol is itself so deadly. It *becomes* deadly when its use is socially normalized and accepted, and fueled by commercial interests. Our friends on Pestalozzi Street sell 80% of their beer to around 20% of beer drinkers. The marijuana marketplace is even more lopsided: 95% of retail marijuana sales go to the top 5% of marijuana's heaviest users. A legal marijuana marketplace can only survive by encouraging early and heavy use. The commercial sale of addictive products requires the creation of more addicted people.

People should not go to jail for using marijuana. But neither should they be subject to the increased normalization and greater availability of cannabis. St. Louis would do well to follow Atlanta's recent example of decriminalizing rather than legalizing. In Atlanta, where marijuana is about equally popular among black and white populations, roughly nine out of ten people arrested and charged with possession in Atlanta between 2014 and 2016 were African-American. Decriminalization eliminated the racial inequalities without creating a new set of problems.

This is a complex problem that deserves your full attention. But in the words of H.L. Mencken, "For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, *and wrong*." This is one of those simple, wrong answers. I would be happy to speak with you and provide the public health side of this very nuanced, fraught issue. NCADA is concerned only with the public health; we have no other dog in this fight.

Sincerely,



Howard Weissman, Executive Director