

Doug Tieman: Allentown would make a mistake by decriminalizing marijuana



Allentown City Council is considering a measure to greatly reduce the penalties for having small amounts of marijuana (Randall Benton/TNS File Photo)

MAY 15, 2018, 6:21 PM

Allentown is considering decriminalizing the possession of marijuana. Setting aside for the moment the question of whether City Council even has the authority to make that call, the decision would be a mistake. The benefits promised for decriminalization won't be achieved, and the cons are more harmful than predicted.

Decriminalization is different from legalization, meaning no legal action will be taken against those who possess a certain amount of marijuana for personal use. Decriminalization gives us only the negative societal effects of not legalizing marijuana: It keeps the drug in the hands of dealers, allows a criminal monopoly to thrive, and doesn't generate tax revenue.

The main argument by supporters of decriminalization is that nonviolent drug offenders are often saddled with criminal records that imperil their recovery and bar their reintegration into our communities.

This paints a picture of occasional users landing in jail for smoking a joint, and this is simply not true: A survey by the Bureau of Justice Statistics showed that 0.7 percent of all state inmates were behind bars solely for marijuana possession. Less than 0.1 percent were marijuana-possession offenders with no prior sentences. The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections confirms in its Annual Sentencing Report there is essentially no one in its prison system for a small amount of marijuana alone.

To be clear, we believe strongly in the need for criminal justice reform and are fully against the criminalization of those suffering from substance-use disorder. However, decriminalizing marijuana is not the solution for that complex problem.

Instead, we should be focusing on evidence-based reforms that discourage use while avoiding criminal penalties. There are a wide array of smart-on-crime alternatives that remove harsh punishments for smoking marijuana, such as drug courts, pretrial diversion programs and probation reform.

The concern centers around minors and their permanent records, so common sense tell us the solution is prevention. Prevention efforts keep kids away from juvenile charges as well as from the serious, long-term effects marijuana has on their brains.

We know this works; recent preventive anti-tobacco campaigns are associated with a significant decrease in youth smoking, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Our energy should be focused on efforts that make our communities healthier and safer through reform, effective prevention and evidenced-based treatment programs.

The reality of marijuana flies against popular opinion. It is not as harmless as its supporters claim, particularly for teenagers and young adults — the very group of people the decriminalization movement claims to advocate for:

- Studies associate regular marijuana use during adolescence with an average loss of eight IQ points.
- Teens heavily engaged in marijuana use show disadvantages in brain development and performance, as well as alterations in brain functioning.
- Heavy marijuana use in adolescence is linked to an increased risk for developing mental illness and poorer cognitive thinking.
- Most of the adolescents and young adults who enter treatment at Caron cite marijuana as their primary drug of choice.

In a perfect world, we could eliminate all youth access to illicit drugs, but that's not the world we live in. What we can do is use the research and the observations already made in the treatment and medical fields to prevent use and minimize harm.

The best way to keep marijuana away from teens is to establish fair and effective prevention and consequential policies. Teens need clear boundaries in a culture that is normalizing teenage use of a harmful substance.

If despite the evidence shown so far, our lawmakers, such as those in Allentown, still believe decriminalization is right for their constituents, we urge you to demand they reconsider, moving slowly with well-educated deliberation. Call your representative; advocate for more local prevention programs for the community and push for tax dollars to fund research before moving forward.

We're playing "catch up" in dealing with the health consequences of tobacco, alcohol and opioid use. If we aren't careful, the decriminalization and legalization of marijuana could be the first step toward another long-term health crisis.

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