

Legalized marijuana can only make Alaska's substance abuse worse

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As an Alaska Native leader and mental health counselor for nearly 40 years, I firmly believe that the legalization and commercialization of recreational marijuana in Alaska will have very detrimental and costly effects on our state and our people. Through my work with the rural communities of Alaska, I have seen almost all of the ways substance abuse damages individual lives, families, and communities, especially young Alaskans. If Ballot Measure 2 passes, there will be very serious negative consequences for our state. I encourage my fellow Alaskans to vote no on 2.

Ballot Measure 2 seeks to legalize, commercialize, and industrialize marijuana and concentrated marijuana products, including the advertising and marketing of potent concentrates such as butane hash oil and shatter that are up to 90 percent THC and drug-infused, child-friendly edibles that look identical to normal candy. These products have already caused serious health and public safety problems in Colorado, such as increased emergency room visits and calls to poison control after kids have accidentally eaten marijuana-laced candy.

I have heard many arguments about how marijuana is safer than alcohol, and they are a distraction from the real issues at stake under the initiative. Ballot Measure 2 is about the commercialization and public promotion of a substance with known harmful health, education, productivity, and safety consequences. Alaska already struggles with some of the highest rates of suicide, substance abuse, and domestic violence in the nation, and legalizing another substance will only increase our problems and the strain on our health care and public safety systems.

I have witnessed the detrimental effects that marijuana has in our Alaska communities with my own eyes, and the price of recreational legalization is simply too high.

One individual I knew began as a smart, outgoing young person with tremendous potential and ambitious goals. After he got involved in marijuana, he began abusing the substance and lost all motivation to pursue his life dreams. Almost all of his money went toward drugs, and he even began asking friends and family for additional funds, bursting out in anger and threatening to harm them if they wouldn't help him sustain his substance use. Unfortunately, this story is not unique. I have seen wasted potential all too often over the years.

I am also concerned with the implications legalized marijuana will have on our Alaska workforce. Heavy machinery operators, health care professionals, transportation workers, and many more of us have jobs that require good judgment, fast reaction times, concentration, and skill. If marijuana is legalized and readily available, there will be lost productivity and a rise in work-related accidents.

In Colorado, special-interest “Big Marijuana” groups have formed to promote and advertise the drug in order to line their pockets and keep profits high. Making money requires expanding markets and attracting new users, many of which are young people. And while proponents of legalization have argued that marijuana taxes will bring money to the state, those funds will pale in comparison to the social, health care, and other costs that will increase. In fact the Alaska Association of Chiefs of Police has estimated that Alaska will see increased costs of \$6 million per year for local governments in public safety alone.

The special interests groups in Washington, D.C., are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to convince Alaskans that we should commercialize marijuana in our state.. The wellbeing of our people is being put second to the profits of the Big Marijuana industry. They should butt out. Alaskans need to learn about issues and decide for themselves, without the likely million-dollar influence of Outside groups with deep pockets.

I have always been a prominent advocate for sobriety, and I have run the Iditarod for 15 years in order to promote wellness and education for Alaska’s children. There is no need to rush into legalization of butane hash oil, shatter, and marijuana candy -- and make a big mistake. We deserve to wait and see what happens in Colorado and Washington to make a more informed decision about what is best for Alaska, our youth, and our communities. I urge my fellow Alaskans to vote no on 2.

Mike Williams, of Akiak, is a longtime mental health counselor, sobriety advocate and Iditarod musher.