

Why 'Big Marijuana' must be stopped

County prosecutor: Arizona should learn from Colorado's failed pot experiment -- before it's too late for our kids.

By Sheila Polk and Merilee Fowler
AZCentral.com | 1/9/15

There are lots of special interests driving a train across America to legalize marijuana for the purpose of getting high.

Most prominent are those who stand to make billions from the commercialization of another addictive substance, aka "Big Marijuana."

They are riding the rails of greed and "dark money," and using the promise of tax revenue to get uninformed voters to come on board. This is Big Tobacco on steroids, and Joe Camel is being replaced by THC candies, lollipops and ice cream.

None of these drivers care about the passengers in the train — our country's youth and our next generation of workers — who will be harmed if this train reaches its destination.

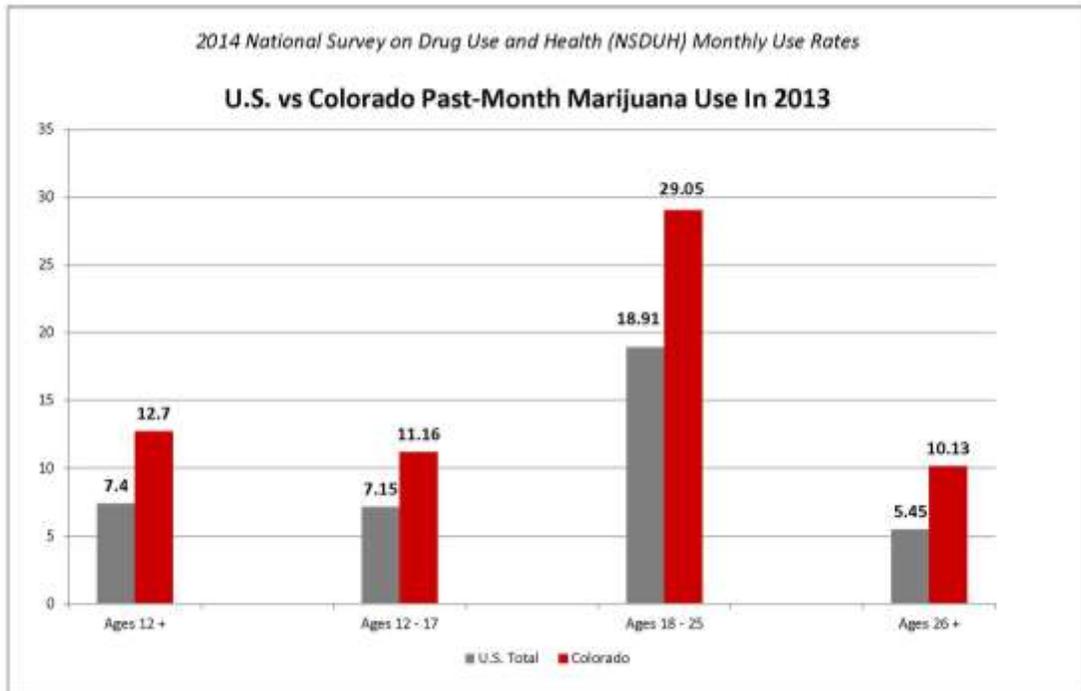
Some of us in Arizona have been peering through the windows of the observation car, and the view is disturbing. If you come on board, you too will see that protecting our kids from this emerging public health crisis should be our No. 1 priority.

The first stop on our train ride is the healthy and safe environment where every child can succeed. Legal marijuana is sending the wrong message to children with 54 percent reporting they do not see regular marijuana use as harmful.

According to the 2012 Arizona Youth Survey and Partnership Attitudinal Tracking Survey, 32,000 more Arizona kids would be more likely to try marijuana if it were legal.

The second stop of our journey is Colorado, where the proof is irrefutable that youth and adults alike will use marijuana more when the drug is legal.

The most recent data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health shows that those who say "legalize and regulate" are on the train that leads to widespread use.



Past-month use of marijuana by Colorado residents ages 12 and up has soared to 12.7 percent, the second highest use rate in the country. By comparison, the national monthly use rate is 7.4 percent, a slight increase of .4 percent between 2012 and 2013. During that same period, Colorado's vaulted 22 percent.

The third stop of our journey is to visit The Science. Never before has there been such a disconnect between popular opinion and what the science tells us about marijuana.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, marijuana is a mind-altering, addictive drug more potent today than ever before. It messes with the brain's natural reward system, substituting the high of a drug for the natural high that comes with a job well done.

Marijuana negatively affects the parts of the brain responsible for memory, learning, attention and reaction time.

Republican representative Ethan Orr of Tucson is pitching to his fellow party members to consider legalizing the recreational use of marijuana.

Picture our schools across Arizona, struggling with so many issues. Do we really want 32,000 more high school students experimenting with a drug that disrupts learning and memory, and causes difficulty with thinking and problem solving?

Perhaps even more critical is the science that concludes that marijuana hurts brain development, and when it is used heavily by young people, its effects on thinking and memory may even be permanent.

Out of New Zealand comes a large long-term study showing that people who began smoking marijuana heavily in their teens lost an average of eight points in IQ between age 13 and age 38. Sadly, the lost cognitive abilities were not fully restored in those who quit smoking marijuana as adults.

Marijuana is addictive. Among those who start young, one in six will become addicted.

Marijuana use is associated with a higher likelihood of dropping out of school, the National Institute on Drug Abuse reports.

Several studies also associate workers' marijuana use with increased absences, tardiness, accidents, workers' compensation claims and job turnover. This deliberate and conscious derailing of a successful path in life for our youth can be avoided by stopping the marijuana legalization train.

Our train now heads back into Colorado to examine the impact of legal marijuana on their schools. Kids in Colorado ages 12 to 17 are using marijuana at a rate that is 38 percent higher than the national average, according to the 2014 National Survey.

Drug-related suspensions and expulsions in Colorado schools have skyrocketed 32 percent between the 2008-09 and 2012-13 academic years.

Let's visit the issue of driving and marijuana, which impairs coordination and causes difficulty with thinking and problem solving.

Fatal crashes involving marijuana use tripled during the previous decade, according to researchers from Columbia University as reported online last January by the American Journal of Epidemiology. Do we really want to add another mind-altering, judgment-impairing substance to the already devastating outcomes of mixing alcohol and driving?

This train derails on the legalizers' claims that we can tax marijuana, get rich and pay for its harms. Our country's experience with "sin taxes" proves the revenue never covers the real costs of addictive substances.

Annual alcohol taxes represent less than 10 percent of the societal costs of regulation, health, addiction, treatment, school drop-outs, lost productivity, DUI fatalities, and child abuse and neglect; tobacco taxes about 13 percent of its societal costs.

Colorado's "regulate and get rich" plan is noticeably failing, having generated this year far less revenue than promised. Ironically, thanks to the high taxes on legal marijuana in that state, black market pot is exploding. And now, thanks to the increase in illegal trafficking, Colorado faces a lawsuit filed by neighboring states Nebraska and Oklahoma.

Arizona's budget is approximately \$9.2 billion. Colorado's "get rich" pot scheme brought in less than \$60 million between January and October of 2014, a drop in the budget bucket even without

considering the additional costs from the societal harms which are far greater than the revenue generated.

Big Tobacco lied to Americans for decades about the deadly consequences of tobacco; we cannot let Big Marijuana inflict similar havoc.

Arizona, let's be courageous leaders who put our youth first. Pull the brakes on this legalization train and keep our state on the right track. Where our children's health and well-being begins, the "rights" of the marijuana industry and pot smokers must end.

Sheila Polk is the Yavapai County Attorney. She and Merilee Fowler are founding members of Marijuana Harmless? Think Again, marijuanaharmlessthinkagain.org.