

Battling Big Marijuana

by Charlene Marietti

AddictionPro.com | August 25, 2014

Providers in the two states that have legalized marijuana want to put the genie back in the bottle. Data may help.

The National Conference on Addiction Disorders was a natural venue for a forthright discussion about the impact of marijuana use in the two states that have legalized it. Addiction Professional Editor Gary Enos asked four professionals to share their experiences in a panel on August 25 in St. Louis.

It's still very early for Colorado, which has eight months of experience with legalized use. Even so, it's not going well, reports Steven Millette, LMHC, LAC, executive director of Aurora-based CeDAR/UCH. "It's an odd distinction to be the experimental state. The horse is out of the barn in Colorado, but the data may be able to reverse the trend."

Although the increased use was expected, he says, early results are sobering. "The data reveals that there is a huge problem looming," he says. And there is data to back up his concern. The number of drivers stopped and under the influence has increased and traffic fatalities have doubled since 2007. Crime in Denver has increased nearly 7 percent. School expulsions have increased and more than a quarter of college students are current marijuana users--a rate significantly higher than the national average.

In Washington State, there has been even less time to evaluate impact, but Scott Munson, executive director of Sundown M Ranch in Yakima shares Millette's concerns. Legalization, which was the result of a sophisticated strategy by companies with deep pockets, has taken the form of normalization of marijuana use. "It is already wreaking havoc in the schools and it's having a negative impact on schools and families," he reports. The amount of use has increased exponentially and it's reaching kids and families not reached before.

'Big Marijuana' is like 'Big Tobacco.' They're using the same strategies and tools that have been seen in activities by Big Tobacco. "The strategy is to normalize marijuana use and make it look more safe," says Andrea Grubb Barthwell, Medical Director, Encounter Medical Group, Director of the Two Dreams Facilities, Chicago. "This is a big, mature industry," she adds, and "terms in the campaigns have been strategically selected to normalize marijuana and they play with our minds by looking at the inconsistencies with alcohol and tobacco. Drug use is not recreational--it's not like snowboarding or soccer."

Although her state has not yet legalized marijuana, Mary Woods, RNC, LADC, MSHS, CEW, WestBridge, Manchester, NH. reports that plenty is being used there. "Most of our parents are old hippies," she notes. They already have their own beliefs about marijuana, but the more science we have behind us, the better. She urges attendees to take a stand and use scientific facts for support.

There has developed a relative perspective that marijuana is harmless, Millette notes. But it's normalization that is harmful. The marketing strategies were effective. Colorado citizens had no idea it is as strong it has been."Hopefully people in other states won't be so nonchalant about the risks from marijuana."