

Group urges wariness amid marijuana push: 'We need to stop this train' A former senior drug policy adviser to the White House said public misinformation is playing into the quest by "Big Marijuana" to reap huge profits from this new market.

By **Judy Benson**

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New London - Calling on his audience to help "stop the next public health crisis from happening," Kevin Sabet, former senior drug policy adviser to the White House, said corporate interests are funding the push for legalization of marijuana, and that public misinformation and the assumption that there's no stopping the momentum for legalizing pot are playing into the quest by "Big Marijuana" to reap huge profits from this new market.

"That attitude of inevitability is the worst thing you could have right now," said Sabet, who formerly worked for the administrations of presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama before leaving in 2011 to help found SAM, Smart Approaches to Marijuana, with former U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy of Rhode Island. "We need to stop this train before it leaves the station. We have a chance now to stop a third legal drug" that would compound the toll alcohol and tobacco are already taking on society.

Sabet, assistant professor in the University of Florida Department of Psychiatry and author of "Reefer Sanity: Seven Great Myths about Marijuana," spoke to about 100 public health, social service and education professionals Tuesday at Connecticut College. Ledge Light Health District, the public health agency for five area towns, sponsored the event.

The talk came as the state's first medical marijuana dispensaries prepare to open this summer, the result of a 2012 law, and Colorado and Washington's recent legalization of marijuana for recreational use. Sabet said there is ample evidence from Colorado that legalization was a mistake - Washington state's law has not yet taken effect - and that Connecticut and other states that could see lobbying by pro-marijuana groups in the future should take heed.

"In Colorado and Washington, they were up against three or four billionaires who invested \$250 million" in pursuing their agenda, he said. Comparing those interests to "Big Tobacco" - which he contends also wants to expand into the legal marijuana industry - he said the marijuana industry is targeting children and teens with edible products such as "Pot Tarts," "Ring Pots" and coupons for pot products with colorful packaging designed to appeal to youth.

"Do you think monkey skeleton grape soda with the marijuana leaf on the label is for your 85-year-old grandmother with cancer?" Sabet asked, showing a slide of the product. "My favorite coupon is one for \$1 off the purchase of your favorite joint if you show your ski pass."

The intent, he said, mirrors the tobacco industry's once-secret campaign aimed at youth, attempting to get teens addicted to marijuana and make them lifelong customers. Contrary to popular misconceptions, he said, one in six teens and one in 10 adult pot users become addicted.

Sabet gave statistics showing an increase since legalization in Colorado of emergency room visits by children poisoned after eating pot-laced cookies and candy bars, an increase in traffic fatalities involving marijuana, more people seeking hospital treatment for marijuana addiction and a 30 percent increase since 2013 in workers testing positive for THC, the psychoactive active ingredient in marijuana, in Colorado Springs. He added that medical marijuana has been legal in that state for several years, and that 74 percent of Denver-area teens have reported using someone else's medical marijuana half the time they have gotten high. Connecticut, he added, should monitor its medical marijuana supply carefully to prevent diversion.

"The image of the marijuana user as a lazy hippy or a stoner on the couch has been changed to a dying 80-year-old," he said, but that profile fits less than 2 percent of medical marijuana seekers. In actuality, he said, the experience in states where medical marijuana is legal show it has been going to "anybody with a pulse and a headache who's over 18."

Sabet opened his talk by emphasizing that the marijuana available today is much more potent than the marijuana many in the baby boomer generation smoked, the result of genetic modification that sharply increased the THC content. It is also now being consumed through methods such as "dabbing" that further concentrates THC.

"The marijuana grown now is five times stronger than it was in 1960," he said.

He cited studies showing regular marijuana use decreases IQs and is linked to increased risk for developing schizophrenia, psychosis, depression and anxiety.

His group advocates research be put toward isolating the medicinal properties of marijuana and developing safe pharmaceuticals that can be given at specific doses by prescription, citing the drug Marinol, an oral mouth spray for cancer pain and multiple sclerosis symptoms. Marinol, a synthetic form of THC that "doesn't get you high," is legal in Canada and Europe.

"Marijuana has medicinal properties, but you don't need to smoke it to get those properties," he said. "Your doctor doesn't tell you to smoke opium to derive the benefits of morphine."

Sabet also sought to debunk misconceptions that legalizing marijuana would help reform the judicial system - fewer than 1 percent of those in prison are there solely for marijuana-related convictions - or that it would return significant sums of money to the legal economy that has been going to the black market. Drug cartels, he said, make most of their money from extortion, heroine, cocaine and human trafficking and little from pot sales, he said, and street-level drug dealers in Colorado say legalization has actually helped their marijuana sales because demand has increased, and they can undercut the high prices being charged at the retail outlets.

SAM, founded 18 months ago, is trying to foster an "adult conversation" about marijuana that gets beyond the polarized debates that allow for only two alternatives, legalization or incarceration, Sabet said.

"We started this because we want to force people to think about this issue in a more nuanced way, in a way that doesn't fit on a bumper sticker," he said.

SAM has affiliates in 22 states, including Connecticut and Rhode Island. John Daviau, president of the Connecticut Association of Prevention Practitioners, which is serving as this state's chapter, said his group is hoping for some revisions to the medical marijuana law, but is also gearing up for a future debate on legalization. He said Connecticut is considered a "second-tier state" by legalization proponents, but he expects "Big Marijuana" interests may start lobbying the state after the gubernatorial election in November.

"This is about how these laws are going to affect our kids," he said.