

Let's get to the truth about pot

By SHEILA POLK

I believe in an America that promotes opportunity, not addiction. "War Against Weed is Lost" by Toni Denis points out the void in public education about the realities of legalized marijuana. Sadly, many continue to choose profits over children, promoting increased drug access and blocking attempts to fund the education that the public and people like Denis clearly need.

Let's take her points one by one.

#1: Treating pot like alcohol will make it safer for our kids.

How would our children possibly benefit from the commercialization of an addictive industry that promotes a drug for profit? For businesses to make money on marijuana, they have to engage new users and promote more frequent use.

Since legalization in Colorado last year, competition for pot profits has sparked a new kind of weed war. Marketing efforts to increase sales and grow more potent pot have intensified. Ben Cort's "An Inside Look at Colorado's Money-Hungry Pot Industry" (Mar. 13, 2014, CADCA.org), notes that retailers now offer home deliveries, discounts, and \$1 joints to anyone showing a ski pass. Now that's something to consider: stoned snowboarders whisking by on the slopes!

According to Cort, "green crack" is already available in Colorado, so strong (20-30 percent THC) that one hit puts the smoker on his back. Marijuana edibles proliferate in forms inherently attractive to children, the industry's future consumers. Gummies, fruit soda, suckers, candy, and baked goods are being sold. Some are using cartoon characters to sell their products.

Cartoon characters to market an addictive drug? Really.

#2: Our prisons are full of marijuana offenders.

This is simply false. Less than one half of one percent of this nation's state prisoners are there for marijuana only, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The marijuana lobby wants you to believe we have only two choices: incarceration or legalization. Not true. Arizona is a leader in alternatives to incarceration. Our drug laws prohibit incarceration for marijuana possession or use until a third conviction. Our laws not only promote but mandate treatment - both for the first and second offenses. Only after an offender has been through our system of drug courts, treatment and second chances may the judge even think about sending them to prison. (ARS §13-901.01).

Marijuana legalization does not mean fewer arrests. It means more DUIs. Traffic fatalities in Colorado involving drivers impaired by marijuana have increased by 114% from 2006-2011. (HIDTA Report, Aug. 2013). That state just launched a public service campaign to dissuade driving "high."

#3: Government will save money.

Legal marijuana means more minors in possession, more public use offenses, and sadly, more children in homes with parents legally abusing an addictive substance. Across this nation, there are three times the number of alcohol-related arrests than marijuana arrests every year. (Am. Society of Addiction Medicine, 2012).

Legalizing yet another addictive substance is a looming public health nightmare. For every tax dollars collected from alcohol sales, 10 more are spent to address alcohol-related criminal conduct, treatment, unemployment, and health care. (Nat. Inst. on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism). The intangibles are even more costly: emotional consequences to children of alcoholics, broken homes, and the impact to our child welfare system. Arizona's child welfare population is on the rise and substance abuse is a significant factor.

#4: Regulation and control will cripple the cartels.

Regulation is a euphemism for taxation. The only thing more addictive than drugs are taxes. Taxation adds to the cost. Legalization means a bigger appetite for marijuana and a bigger market for the cartels. The black market in Colorado is thriving, as Harry Smith discovered in his recent interview with an underground dealer there. ("Marijuana in America: Colorado Pot Rush," CNBC.)

Teens in Arizona use alcohol at twice the rate they use marijuana, according to the Arizona Youth Survey. Why? It is accessible. Use by kids of marijuana is on the rise as access to marijuana increases under the guise of "regulation."

Responsible adults should not rush to embrace a legal industry that makes its money from addiction. This is not a Democrat versus Republican issue. We must all unite to do everything we can to create environments within which all children can thrive and succeed. Inform yourself with facts, not the myths promoted by an industry motivated by financial gain at the expense of addiction.

The American Society of Addiction Medicine advises us of the significant public health threat posed by legal marijuana and urges public education. Ms. Denis's article illustrates the need.

The single most powerful action we can take to combat drug abuse is prevention. Prevention works.

Sheila Polk is the Yavapai County Attorney and Co-Chair of MATFORCE, the Yavapai County Substance Abuse Coalition.