

# Officials sign Citizens for a Healthy Pueblo petition for ballot questions

By Anthony Mestas

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Pueblo health officials including some from St. Mary-Corwin Medical Center and Parkview Medical Center added their voice Wednesday to a controversial issue speaking firmly against commercial marijuana in Pueblo County.

CEOs from both hospitals and the leader of Pueblo Community Health Center said their board members are in support of a ballot measure that would shutter the commercialization and promotion of recreational marijuana in the city and county.

The event was hosted by Citizens for a Healthy Pueblo.

Speakers listed what they called the negative impact of marijuana in the county before signing the petition at the conclusion of the discussion. They also urged citizens to support the measure and to become well-informed about issues surrounding the ballot measure.

Amendment 64 allows local governments to opt in or opt out of permitting recreational marijuana, or to put the issue to a vote of the people. In Pueblo County, county commissioners chose to approve recreational pot absent a local vote.

Brian Moore, president and CEO at St. Mary-Corwin, said his hospital strongly believes that the impact of recreational marijuana is endangering the health of the community.

He said the hospital board is in support of the ballot initiative.

He said St. Mary-Corwin, through mid-April, is on track to see an 88 percent increase in overall “cannabis encounters” this year when compared to 2015.

Moore said since the passing of 64, where toxicology reports were available, the hospital has seen a nearly 32 percent increase in patients testing positive for THC, the psychological active property in marijuana.

“Last month alone, nearly half of the newborns at St. Mary-Corwin Medical Center who were drug-tested due to suspected prenatal exposure tested positive for marijuana,” Moore said.

“Legally, it is our duty as a health care organization to inform the community of the negative implications of marijuana commercialization on our health. Commercialization goes against our mission and vision and hinders us from nurturing the health of the people in our communities.”

Mike Baxter, president and CEO at Parkview, said since the passing of Amendment 64 in 2012, the hospital has seen an increase in patient harm caused by the access to recreational marijuana.

“It’s our strong belief that commercial marijuana outlets in our county have negatively impacted the health of our community,” Baxter said.

He said Parkview has seen a 51 percent increase in the number of children 18 years and under being treated at the hospital in its emergency rooms for marijuana-related conditions over the past two years.

Donald Moore, CEO of Pueblo Community Health Center, the legalization of recreational marijuana has hurt the facility’s ability to attract health care professionals to the community.

“We recently had a physician decline to be interviewed with PCHC due to Pueblo’s reputation with commercialized marijuana,” Donald Moore said.

He said it is working against Pueblo in a time when there is a very high demand for doctors and nurses.

Dr. Michael Barris, co-chief medical officer at PCHC, said studied trends that appear to be related to the increase and availability to marijuana are having a serious and negative effect on the future of the population.

Barris said trends include increased frequent use of marijuana in the prenatal population. He said he also is seeing an increased number of patients moving to Pueblo specifically because of marijuana.

Barris did not say how he obtained that information.

Officials said both emergency rooms at the two hospitals have seen significant increases in the number of marijuana-related encounters and trauma activations since the passing of Amendment 64.

“This increased volume of patients is putting a serious strain on the resources of the local health care community,” said Karen Randall, a physician with Southern Colorado Emergency Medical Associates, who treats patients at Parkview.

Steven Simerville, a doctor at St. Mary-Corwin, said although it is unclear that marijuana is the cause of all the problems, the surge is definitely related in time to the passing of Amendment 64.

He said that it is a myth that marijuana is harmless.

“When I talk to new mothers about avoiding breast-feeding because they choose to continue smoking marijuana rather than abstaining while they breast feed, they do not believe that marijuana is harmful to their babies. They believe this so strongly that they refuse my advice to

discontinue smoking marijuana or discontinue breast-feeding and continue to breast-feed and smoke marijuana,” Simerville said.

There are currently two petitions for the measure being circulated — one for the county and one for the city.

Petitioners on the county petition need to gather 5,454 signatures to place the initiative on the November ballot. The last day to file is Aug. 8.

Petitioners for the city need 1,935 signatures by July 11.

The petition also faces a lawsuit claiming that it is unconstitutional.