



Beyond “Just Say No”: Youth as Assets in Marijuana Use Prevention & Intervention June 20, 2019

Presented By: Jessica Neuwirth, MPA

After five years of legalized retail marijuana in Colorado, an abundance of lessons have been learned about engaging youth and youth-serving professionals in prevention and intervention of substance abuse. As in Michigan, a ballot proposal resulted in marijuana legalization and the necessity to balance the will of the people with responsive regulatory framework for public health. This included education for safe, legal and responsible use and emphasis on youth prevention.

Modern marijuana is far more potent than the marijuana used when marijuana use first became widespread in the sixties and seventies. Smoking marijuana used to be the primary method of using marijuana. Today there are numerous methods for using the drug, including edibles, vapors, and dabbing methods. Edible and concentrated forms of marijuana contain an average level of the ingredient that creates the “high”, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), that exceeds 60%.

Many of the reasons that juveniles use marijuana have not changed. Apart from the obvious desire to get “high” and “have fun”, youth are also motivated to use in order to self-medicate for stress relief; it is easier to mentally check out than to learn effective coping mechanisms. Youth report it is also a way to “fit in”. What has shifted with legalization, even though use is illegal for youth, is exposure to and availability of the drug. Also, there has been a cultural shift towards greater acceptance of marijuana use as an overall cultural norm and lifestyle.

Marijuana use by youth has legal, social, and developmental consequences. Data supports that youth who use marijuana:

- Break federal, state, and community laws and rules
- Are less likely to successfully complete juvenile probation, with positive drug screens being the number one reason
- Have a reduced chance of reaching full brain development potential
- Have learning and memory problems
- Have lower math and reading scores
- Are more likely to use other drugs in addition to marijuana, and engage in other risky behaviors
- Have increased risk of developing or worsening psychosis
- In comparison to other states, a greater percentage of Colorado youth do not use marijuana since legalization, but those that do use in greater amounts.
- It has proved more difficult for youth to quit using when they start use at an early age

Colorado collected extensive data on marijuana use across the social spectrum (available for review in the power point for Ms. Neuwirth’s presentation) and drew heavily from policies and lessons learned from alcohol and tobacco prevention programs to develop marijuana prevention



initiatives and policies. For juvenile prevention, “place and promotion” are significant considerations to restrict youth access to drugs and alcohol. Regulation includes:

- Smoke-free policies
- Advertising restrictions
- Limits on hours of sale at retail dispensaries
- Minimum age purchases
- Retail density and buffering restrictions

An important consideration is product labeling and marketing. THC-based products should not be packaged in a manner that is appealing to teens or children, such as brightly colored packaging and hip logos that mimic candy and other currently faddish symbols. Products must be clearly labeled with warning labels, sold in child-proof containers, and carried from stores in special exit bags. Ms. Neuwirth reported that in some areas these policies and recommendations are effectively practiced but it is reported that some locales, such as Denver, have not done this well, and poorer neighborhoods particularly suffer from that.

Like Michigan, Colorado counties had the option to “opt out” of allowing retail marijuana dispensaries. In addition, dispensaries are not allowed on federal lands. Selling or giving marijuana to minors is prohibited. Also, it is illegal to use marijuana and drive, however Ms. Neuwirth pointed out that application of that law is still tricky; use of marijuana does not necessarily equal impairment, and impairment does not necessarily equal conviction. There are also still questions and shifting norms around marijuana purchased and used from the “black market” versus products purchased at a dispensary.

As in any public health and safety initiative, youth drug abuse prevention requires a collaborative approach that includes policy makers, health providers, treatment providers, educators, communities, and perhaps especially, parents.