

NJ Must Leverage Public Health Expertise During Cannabis Discussion

As discussion regarding the legalization of recreational marijuana accelerates and monumental change to State regulation seems imminent, members of the New Jersey Legislature must ask themselves two urgent and critically important questions: What is public health, and why aren't New Jersey's public health leaders at the table, providing essential input to statewide discussions regarding the legalization of recreational marijuana? If ever there was impending significant public health issue in our state, consensus from health professionals dictates that this is it.

So what *is* public health? Though seldom seen, public health means many things to many of New Jersey's residents. Public health professionals are in your community, silently preventing disease, ensuring safe food, protecting the environment, preventing childhood lead poisoning, abating nuisances, controlling rabies and zoonotic disease, and so much more. Most people are unaware of all the ways in which New Jersey's public health practitioners support and protect their communities. Public health *does* protect against a myriad of health risks by utilizing trained, credentialed professionals who enforce, investigate and educate, but that is not all public health does to keep communities healthy and safe.

Public health leaders are also essential partners in providing awareness and education regarding substance abuse, addiction prevention and related services. In fact, many of your community's public health professionals work directly with municipal police, schools, adults and allied health professionals in promoting or initiating anti-addiction programs.

'Public health' is a blanket term but includes a broad scope of professionals working in literally hundreds of different roles: from health directors to educators; from environmental health specialists to nurses and addiction specialists; from mental health professionals to physicians, dieticians and industrial hygienists; and from emergency response coordinators to volunteers and quasi-governmental specialists. The collective expertise that these individuals provide to policymakers and the public is instrumental in preserving and, in fact, improving the health of New Jersey's nine million residents.

To that end, it is time to stop pretending that the public's health will not be impacted by the legalization of recreational marijuana. The public health community is urging state lawmakers to include us in time sensitive and comprehensive discussions regarding the implications of implementing legal recreational marijuana. This is potentially one of the most significant changes to law in the state's history, and it goes without saying that the ramifications are far-reaching. The possible effects to public health are many fold and significant, and we implore legislators to leverage the expertise and experience of public health leaders, including our knowledge of New Jersey's public health infrastructure. Public health can provide the most current data and lessons learned from other states that have recently legalized marijuana.

We all can agree that if recreational marijuana is legalized, it must be done so in a way that will not adversely affect the health and safety of our residents. The public health community does, in fact, have concerns regarding the proposed bill to decriminalize marijuana, and these concerns include:

- Childhood poisoning from ingesting edible cannabis products
- Expanded mental health and drug treatment services for communities
- Funding for health education curricula pertaining to marijuana and substance use
- The potential rise in automobile accidents and fatalities due to impaired drivers
- Effective measures to keep recreational marijuana out of the hands of minors

- Sufficient efforts to prevent workplace abuses, particularly for healthcare professionals, operators of large machinery and vehicle services

To date, our state legislators have not solicited the expertise and opinion of our public health leaders. Public Health professionals work every day to prevent illness and disease, and to preserve the quality of life for our residents. Discussing the legalization of marijuana with public health experts *now* – prior to legislative disposition or rule change – is not only smart and easy, but simply is the *responsible* thing to do in moving forward.

Megan Avallone, President
NJ Association of County and City Health Officials

Linda Brown, President
NJ Society for Public Health Education

Lynette Medeiros, President
NJ Environmental Health Association

Paschal Nwako, President
NJ Public Health Association

New Jersey Association of Public Health Nurse Administrators Inc.