

STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

MARIJUANA OPPONENTS, SUPPORTERS BACK STUDY MEASURING USAGE

By Andy Metzger
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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, MAY 16, 2016 - At odds over the prudence of legalizing marijuana in Massachusetts, people on both sides of the proposed ballot question agree with the idea of measuring marijuana usage now while it is still largely illicit.

"What we've seen happen in other states is that they don't have existing baseline data on recreational marijuana use and it becomes very difficult for both sides to have honest conversations about the effects and impacts," Rep. Hannah Kane, a Shrewsbury Republican who opposes legalization, told the News Service.

"We're all for a baseline study," Jim Borghesani, communications director for the Campaign to Regulate Marijuana Like Alcohol, told the News Service. Clarifying that he opposes delaying a decision on legalization before a study, he said, "I think that as states move forward with regulating marijuana it will help to gather facts."

Borghesani's group is moving a question toward the November ballot that would legalize marijuana use and possession for people ages 21 and up starting in December, followed by legalized retail sale. In 2008 Massachusetts voters decriminalized possession of up to an ounce of marijuana and in 2012 voters legalized marijuana for therapeutic use, with several dispensaries coming online since then.

As lawmakers deal with tight finances, there are only months remaining before a potential statewide vote on marijuana, leaving a shrinking window to gather data.

During its budget debate in April, the House rejected an amendment sponsored by Kane to devote \$1.25 million for the University of Massachusetts to conduct a baseline study.

Under Kane's amendment, UMass would have conducted a study of "the existing occurrences of marijuana use in the commonwealth," including "the existing programs available that prevent and address the harmful consequences of marijuana use in schools and the community; an analysis of issues around the effects of marijuana use on public safety of citizens; the economic and fiscal issues around marijuana use."

Senate leaders plan to unveil their version of the fiscal 2017 budget on Tuesday with floor debate over amendments scheduled for next week.

David Buchanan, chair of the Department of Health Promotion & Policy at UMass, told the News Service there is "a tremendous amount of data out there" on the topic, but it has "pretty serious limitations," including survey questions that lump marijuana in with other drugs.

Buchanan, who opposes legalization, told the News Service he would hope to hone in on several areas, including driving under the influence of marijuana. Some data in that area could come from requesting confidential blood samples from people in hospital emergency departments, Buchanan said.

Buchanan said other study areas would be how marijuana use corresponds with the use of other drugs and alcohol, daily marijuana usage, exposure to media around the subject, sources of the drug, and means of consumption - including e-cigarettes and a process known as "dabbing."

The professor is "deeply concerned" about the ballot question and finds it "stunning" that policy around the nation is shifting to a more

permissive approach to marijuana "with very little good scientific data," he told the News Service.

One hindrance to the study of marijuana is its "Schedule One" classification, which the Drug Enforcement Administration defines as containing "no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse."

Last month the DEA reportedly announced it would decide within the first half of the year whether to reschedule marijuana.

Brian Smith, a spokesman for the Washington State Liquor and Cannabis Board, said there is a "dearth of good research," and the initiative that legalized marijuana in the Pacific Northwest state also set up long-term studies on the impact.

"You want to know the impact before and the impact later," Smith told the News Service. He said, "It's just hard to measure something that's been illegal."

Sen. Jason Lewis, a Winchester Democrat who heads up a special Senate committee on marijuana and opposes legalization, said, "We want to also make sure we're taking steps so that if the ballot question were successful, that Massachusetts is in the best possible position to be able to respond and to implement it."

Grant funding may be available for the study, Lewis said.

Lewis said the state needs to determine means of testing drivers for marijuana intoxication "that can stand up in court," including looking at a form of mandatory blood test, and said there should be a ban on consuming marijuana while driving.

The House rejected a proposed budget amendment filed by Norfolk Republican Rep. Shawn Dooley that would have created penalties similar to the "open container" law, but for marijuana.