

Question 4: Health and Wellness Concerns in Legalizing Recreational Marijuana

State Representative Hannah Kane



Rep. Hannah Kane

This fall, Massachusetts voters will be faced with an important choice. They will choose whether they believe now is the time to allow a new, billion-dollar commercial marijuana industry into Massachusetts to market and sell its products, including dangerous edible products, to our families. That is the essence of Question 4.

We know that if this ballot question passes, there will be serious consequences for the health of all Massachusetts residents. It also will have a direct impact on the medical community, particularly as we grapple with the ongoing opiate crisis.

There are not many issues that can bring such a broad coalition together, but the potential legalization of the commercial marijuana industry is one of them.

The coalition to oppose Question 4 already consists of a bi-partisan group of elected leaders – including Governor Charlie Baker, Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito, Boston Mayor Marty Walsh and Speaker Robert DeLeo – from every region of this state. Just as importantly, a strong coalition of community activists, business leaders, anti-addiction specialists, public safety leaders and medical professionals also are lending their voices to oppose Question 4. Among the medical/health care associations opposing Question 4 are: the Massachusetts Hospital Association, the National Association of Mental Illness (Massachusetts Chapter), the Conference for Boston Teaching Hospitals, Association for Behavioral Healthcare, the MA Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Nurse Association Massachusetts and the Massachusetts Medical Society.

There are many reasons why this ballot question will put Massachusetts on a wrong path. This proposed law was written by the marijuana industry and sets no limits on the number of pot shops in the state. In Colorado, that has resulted in more marijuana businesses than McDonalds, 7-Elevens and Starbucks combined. It will create a new black market by allowing individuals to grow thousands of dollars of marijuana in their homes, even over the objections of their neighbors. And in states that have legalized, we have seen the marijuana industry particularly target poor communities and also have seen racial disparities in arrest rates widen, particularly among juveniles.

For the medical professionals reading this publication, however, we wanted to focus on the serious health consequences that will result if Question 4 passes. These consequences will have a direct impact on your patients, your profession and all of our families.

Ushering in the edible industry

One of the biggest sea changes of allowing the commercial marijuana industry into Massachusetts will be the creation of the lucrative, and dangerous, edible market. Question 4 specifically authorizes marijuana edible products like candy, gummy bears, cookies and “cannabis cola” to be sold in Massachusetts. These edibles are now a huge part of the marijuana industry’s profit model, accounting for approximately 50 percent of marijuana sales in Colorado, and that number is growing. These products are highly potent and can have THC levels reaching as high as 90 percent (traditional joints currently have THC of around 17 percent to 18 percent).

These products are also attractive to our youth and have a serious risk for accidental ingestion by children and pets. Doctors at Children’s Hospital Denver reported that after legalization, the ER began treating one to two kids a month for accidental marijuana ingestion, mostly in the form of edibles. Prior to legalization, they reported none. As an example, in 2014, a 2-year-old girl from Longmont, Colo., was sent to the hospital after accidentally eating a marijuana cookie she found in front of her apartment building.

Youth addiction

The industry has tried to claim that marijuana is a “benign plant.” Medical professionals know that pot is anything but benign. According to studies by the National Academy of Sciences and other organizations, marijuana use by adolescents can impair brain development, impact long-term career growth and even lower IQ. We also know that is it highly addictive. One in six people who begin marijuana use as an adolescent become addicted.

That is why it is so troubling that, according to the National Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration, Colorado has become the No. 1 state in teen marijuana use since legalization. The long-term health implications of that reality will be felt for years in that state. Why would we even risk that potential here in Massachusetts?

Impaired Driving

We also know that states that have legalized commercial marijuana have seen a dramatic increase in impaired driving fatalities. In Washington State, they saw the number of fatal car crashes involving marijuana double in just one year since legalization.

Putting our work combatting the opiate crisis at risk

As every medical professional reading this publication knows, we are in the midst of the worst addiction crisis in generations. Families are grappling with the realities of addiction, and our medical and recovery communities are stretched to capacity. Why would we risk introducing a billion-dollar industry focused on the marketing and selling of another addictive drug at this time?

We are not even talking about the gateway drug argument here – there are medical opinions on both sides of that issue. But at a time when we are trying to convince our kids about the dangers of addictive drugs, it is an inherently mixed message to simultaneously allow an industry to come in and promote THC-infused gummy bears and snacks. As Gov. Baker has said, now is not the right time to introduce this major new challenge to our families, our recovery specialists and our medical community. Let’s handle one challenge at a time and, at the very least, hit the pause button on commercial marijuana.

When we formed our committee to oppose Question 4, we chose to name it the “Campaign for a Safe and Healthy Massachusetts.” That is because we knew that there would be significant health consequences to bringing the commercial marijuana industry into Massachusetts. More important than that, medical professionals who are directly dealing with patients and families every day understand what those serious consequences would be.

As you consider this issue, we respectfully ask for you to lend your voice to our coalition opposing the commercial marijuana industry in Massachusetts. And then we hope that voters will make the right choice in November and vote No on Question 4.

For more information, please visit <http://www.safeandhealthyma.com/> or on twitter at @safehealthyma

Hannah Kane is a state representative for the 11th Worcester District, a member of the Joint Committee on Public Health and a Steering Committee member of the Campaign for a Safe and Healthy Massachusetts