

## Preventing Youth Marijuana Use: Thinking Strategically at the Local Level

With the imminent opening of an adult-use shop in Gardner, there will soon be 10 recreational marijuana sales outlets across the Commonwealth, according to the Massachusetts Cannabis Control Commission.

However, as the retail marijuana landscape in Massachusetts grows, so do efforts by cities and towns to delay expansion. Citing the need for more time to consider planning and zoning, cities and towns were permitted to file moratoriums to ban or delay recreational marijuana sales for one year and almost 200 did so. Those moratoriums expired for 135 towns in 2019, and the number of completed licensing applications has skyrocketed, with an estimated 292 retail applications waiting for Commission approval.

Faced with the reality of cannabis sales, cities and towns have taken steps to mitigate perceived risks, like the Hudson police department's requirements that all recreational customers be bussed in from a lot two miles away to prevent traffic jams in the town center or the "community impact tax" of 3% that may be levied on cannabis sales to benefit a city or town.

It appears clear that although 2016's ballot initiative legalizing cannabis sales passed with almost 54% of the vote, many of the Commonwealth's residents are still deeply concerned about cannabis retailers operating in their own communities.

While these concerns are completely understandable, banning sales isn't the answer, says Gisela Rots at Prevention Solutions@EDC (Education Development Center in Waltham). "Communities that became "dry towns" to reduce underage drinking didn't keep alcohol from being consumed. Similarly, banning marijuana sales won't keep marijuana out of communities. Legalization or retail access isn't the question any more. Instead, we need to help cities and towns think strategically."

For that, cities and towns can look to the lessons learned over the years from retail sales of alcohol. From the complete failure of Prohibition in the 1920's to increasing the drinking age from 18 to 21 in the early 1980s to current city and statewide efforts to preferentially license establishments that prioritize sales of food as well as alcohol, the almost 100-year history of alcohol sales in America provides a wealth of lessons to draw from.

Most effective, according to Rots, are policies and laws that rely on established public health practices to reduce negative consequences of substance use. Termed "public health best

practices,” these may include limits on the number of retailers selling a substance, or restrictions on how much of a substance may be purchased or consumed at one time. Increasing enforcement of age requirements to purchase and consequences for operating vehicles while under the influence of a substance are also public health best practices.

Massachusetts has adopted statewide best practices as they license cannabis retailers, but there are still many ways that cities and towns can also adopt best practice policies and laws to decrease negative consequences of cannabis use at the local level.

### **Marketing Matters**

One of the easiest policies for cities and towns to adopt is to regulate local advertising by cannabis retailers. Exposure to advertising disproportionately influences youth perceptions and attitudes on everything from beauty trends to junk food to video games. The link between alcohol marketing and youth drinking is no exception, with a recently published review of 12 studies. In all of these studies, which involved over 35,000 teens in Asia, Europe and North America, researchers noted that the greater the exposure to alcohol advertising, the higher the likelihood that teens would consume alcohol.

According to the study, kids and teenagers are exposed to a wide variety of alcohol marketing, from digital media to television advertising, product placement and celebrity endorsements. Even environmental level advertising such as store signage and billboards can influence teen alcohol use rates.

In Massachusetts, the Cannabis Control Commission is already addressing this issue with efforts like the “85% rule,” meaning that advertising must be reasonably targeted at an audience that is at least 85% composed of people over the age of 21, and regulations aimed at keeping cannabis advertising “discreet.”

However, there are additional regulations that cities and towns could enact to bolster statewide efforts such as specifying signage and advertising guidelines by local cannabis shops or banning the usage of billboards for cannabis advertising within a locality.

### **Partner with Parents**

Since alarm bells first went off in the mid-1990s about rising rates of underage alcohol consumption, prevention practitioners and educators have developed a wide variety of tools for parents to discuss underage alcohol consumption with their children. States that have already legalized marijuana prevention have adopted those tactics for parents to discuss cannabis use with their children.

In Colorado, for example, the [Responsibility Grows Here](#) campaign has one initiative squarely at parents. The website provides parents with information on how cannabis use affects growing children and teens and provides FAQs for how to discuss cannabis with kids. Perhaps most useful is a section dedicated to discussing how to talk to kids candidly about cannabis if the parent is a user. Washington State's [Start Talking Now](#) campaign is similarly focused on encouraging active dialogue between parents and children on both alcohol and marijuana use.

Implementing a locally based, parent-focused campaign to encourage parents to discuss cannabis with their children and teens seems eminently feasible for Massachusetts cities and towns, which often have local control over schools and community centers.

### **Store It Safely**

While it would seem that youth alcohol prevention campaigns would encourage parents to keep their alcohol stored under lock and key to discourage youth consumption, parents in the United States are legally able to provide alcohol to their children for personal consumption, which means that there have been almost no prevention campaigns that have encourage safe storage.

For cannabis, the landscape is already markedly different since marijuana is still federally classified as a Schedule I drug, meaning there is no similar allowance for parents to provide cannabis to their children. As a result, both the cannabis industry and state prevention campaigns have recommended that parents keep their cannabis products stored in a locked box to prevent youth access.

For Massachusetts cities and towns interested in reducing access to children and teens, partnering with cannabis retailers to offer low-cost or free lock boxes could be written into local "host community agreements" that must be agreed upon before a cannabis retailer is allowed to open.

While Massachusetts residents await with anticipation and dread the expansion of Commonwealth's retail cannabis landscape, the die is cast: cannabis sales are here to stay. With thoughtful planning and a focus on protecting public health, Massachusetts cities and towns can set a national standard for embracing the future of legal cannabis while continuing to build healthy communities.

*To learn more about Prevention Solutions@EDC resources and services to support responsible marijuana use, contact Gisela Rots at [grots@edc.org](mailto:grots@edc.org).*