

May 31, 2018



Responsibly Legislating Marijuana Legalization

Recreational marijuana is likely coming to Michigan, either through ballot or legislative action. A ballot proposal could be approved for November, but the legislature may vote to approve the policy themselves. Lawmakers [anticipate](#) significant new public revenues from recreational marijuana excise and sales taxes. While some have proposed using these potential revenues to fund various state priorities, others have proposed using them to decrease other sources of public revenue. Given current knowledge of the potential impact of marijuana on youth, and against the backdrop of our state's ongoing opioid and synthetic opioid crisis, Michigan lawmakers have an opportunity through the legalization of recreational marijuana to invest in comprehensive supports to protect children, youth, and their caregivers from substance abuse and make progress on one of our most acute public health crises.

[Current research on marijuana use](#) allows policymakers a glimpse at how legalization could impact outcomes for children and youth. Recent marijuana use has been found to impair adolescent cognitive performance, and studies suggest that marijuana use during one's youth may pose long-term risks to brain development. Furthermore, cannabis use during pregnancy is linked to lower birth weight in babies. Researchers have established risk factors for adolescent cannabis use, which include early alcohol use, parental substance use, poor school performance, antisocial behaviors, and childhood sexual abuse.

Michigan lawmakers would be wise to acknowledge both the impact of marijuana early in life and the existing need for substance abuse prevention and use the opportunity of recreational marijuana legalization to invest in evidence-based programs that help reduce substance use rates and improve outcomes for children, youth, and families. These programs desperately need support, and currently rely virtually completely on federal funds to operate:

Afterschool programs

High quality expanded learning programs keep kids engaged in school, helping young people better see their own strengths, build on their own successes and leadership potential, and nurture relationships with their peers, skills that protect against substance use. Michigan provides no state funds for direct support of high-quality afterschool programs.

Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention

People who experience abuse or neglect at an early age are more likely to cope using substances, and substance use is related to increased abuse and neglect rates. Since 2005, Michigan has seen a 41 percent increase in children living in families investigated for child maltreatment. Too often, investigated cases involved Michigan's youngest residents. Since 2000, abuse and neglect prevention funding has fallen behind the need for services.

Foster Care Services

All young people face barriers to success as they move into adulthood, and many rely on their parents until their late 20's. When young people leave foster care, many have not had the kind of experiences that will help their transition. The state carries a unique responsibility to fully

invest in their transition into adulthood. Coordinated education, health, and human services for youth aging out of care can bolster their physical, mental and behavioral health, connect them with social supports, protect against substance use, and lead to educational and work success.

Michigan Prevention Network

The Prevention Network brings together local communities and partners to prevent youth substance abuse. Members of the Michigan Prevention Network Include the Michigan Coalition to Reduce Underage Drinking, a statewide network working to prevent early alcohol abuse.

Plans of Safe Care

A plan of safe care is developed by a medical professional or by MDHHS that addresses the health and safety needs of a newborn infant affected by substance use. When connected with accessible, quality services, plans of safe care can drastically improve the chances of a child overcomes their substance-related issues and leads a healthy life.

Michigan would not be alone in using the occasion of legalizing recreational marijuana to invest in comprehensive substance use prevention. There is precedent for such an approach: other states, including Washington and Colorado, have linked marijuana tax revenues to substance use services and other evidence-based programs including community health centers, drop-out prevention, public education efforts, school-based health, and youth services, all of which contribute to improving substance use outcomes.

Our state is entering an unfamiliar world with the advent of legal recreational marijuana. As we embark on this new public policy, we must think carefully and holistically through both the potential benefits and pitfalls of legal marijuana, especially as they relate to children and youth, whose brains are still developing. It's up to us to use this chance to meaningfully close disparities in the health and life outcomes of Michigan's children and youth.

Michigan's Children is the only statewide independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children from cradle to career and their families. Our emphasis is on influencing public policies that close equity gaps and ensure that the children and youth who face the most challenges have the supports they need to succeed in school and life. By working to reform public policy, we improve the odds for all children, and support the work of those who provide services that help individual children overcome the odds.