

# Regulating Marijuana in Rhode Island: A Public Health and Safety Approach Takes Place to Educate Locals and Leaders



After a successful week at the midterm ballot boxes, the crusade to end cannabis prohibition seems to be gaining momentum. With victories in Oregon, Alaska and Washington, D.C., supporters are champing at the bit to see where the next domino will fall. One such domino has been teetering on its edge for the past three years and one of the major forces behind this push is a man named Jared Moffat, director of Regulate Rhode Island. After a long morning of training and organizing the future advocates of the regulation and taxation movement here in RI, Jared was gracious enough to sit with me and discuss the next big event that he has organized, which takes place at Brown University, 64 College St, List Art Building Room 120 on Nov 18 from 6:30-8:30pm.

**David Sorgman:** First off, who is Jared Moffat and why has a clean cut kid like you chosen to become involved with the cannabis movement?

**Jared Moffat:** Cannabis prohibition is a central pillar in the war on drugs, and for several years I have been an active member of the movement to dismantle our failed drug policies that contribute to mass incarceration, the stigmatization of marginalized populations, and terrible violence here and abroad. I have always felt called to organize people to overcome social injustice. So when I saw that we have a real opportunity to remove a cornerstone of the war on drugs by ending cannabis prohibition in Rhode Island, I decided to go for it.

**DS:** There are a few local organizations that deal with the cannabis topic such as NORML, RIPAC and SSDP. What is Regulate RI and how do you differ from these other groups?

**JM:** Regulate Rhode Island is a coalition of citizens and organizations working to replace cannabis prohibition with a system to regulate and tax the sale of cannabis to adults. Regulate RI shares a lot of goals in common with those other groups, especially NORML and SSDP, which are both Regulate RI coalition partners. Where we differ is that our mission is solely to pass a law to regulate cannabis like alcohol. We wanted to establish a formidable political force with a very clear focus, drawing support from a broad alliance of groups that come at the issue from different perspectives. We are one of those rare “tri-partisan” political coalitions whose members include leaders from the Libertarian, Republican,

and Democratic parties.

**DS:** What can you tell us about this next event, Regulating Marijuana in Rhode Island: A Public Health and Safety Approach and why have you decided to put this event together?

**JM:** With the addition of Oregon and Alaska to the list of states that have decided to regulate cannabis like alcohol, the recent elections on Nov 4 showed us that momentum for cannabis policy reform is continuing to grow. Regulate Rhode Island is hopeful that Lil Rhody will become the next state to follow that path. As discussion about cannabis policy reform gains more attention, we wanted to hold an event to educate state leaders and the general public about what it is exactly that we're trying to do. We cannot rely on sound bytes in the media to adequately convey our message (although *Motif* does a great job of that!). So there's a real need to facilitate public discussion about the issue, inform Rhode Islanders about what is happening in states like Colorado, and educate people about the opportunity to regulate cannabis here in Rhode Island.

**DS:** I noticed that there are some pretty significant names (local and national) on the list of speakers for this event. Who are the individuals and what kind of expertise does each bring to the discussion?

**JM:** We wanted to choose a diverse set of panelists that could contribute to the discussion about cannabis policy from different angles. From a medical and public health perspective, we have Dr. David Lewis, founder of Brown University's Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies, and Michelle McKenzie, a public health researcher at The Miriam Hospital. Elizabeth Comery is a retired attorney and former Providence police officer. Ms. Comery is also a speaker for Law Enforcement Against Prohibition (LEAP), and she can explain why regulating cannabis is better than prohibition for public safety reasons. Jim Vincent, president of NAACP - Providence, will speak to the harmful consequences of cannabis prohibition for communities of color. Mason Tvert is a nationally recognized advocate for cannabis regulation and was a leader in the successful campaigns to regulate cannabis in Colorado and Alaska. Pat Oglesby is the former Chief Tax Counsel for the US Senate Finance Committee and an expert on cannabis tax policies. And finally, we will have the primary sponsor of the Marijuana Regulation, Control, and Taxation Act, Senator Josh Miller from Cranston, to explain his proposal and his vision for a regulated cannabis market in Rhode Island.

**DS:** With so many advocates and a majority of popular support, it seems like regulation and taxation is obviously the people's choice. However, in Rhode Island we do not have the option of a ballot process to decide an outcome for this issue. Why is that and can you explain what the alternative to this method is?

**JM:** Rhode Island laws say that only the General Assembly has the power to put a question on the ballot. So unlike other states that allow citizens themselves to put initiatives on the ballot, Rhode Island must go through the state legislature. We believe it makes more sense to put forward a bill to regulate marijuana like alcohol rather than ask the General Assembly for a ballot question. The former option is a one-step process, whereas the latter takes two steps. It is possible that the General Assembly may decide they would rather put the question to the voters, and we would certainly welcome that if they are unwilling to vote on a bill themselves. But we are trying to pass a law directly through the state legislature as our first course of action.

**DS:** What do you feel are the prospects of RI legislators passing such legislation in this manner?

**JM:** I am very optimistic about our chances this year. A lot of legislators see the writing on the wall and recognize that the end of cannabis prohibition is inevitable — it's simply a question of when. They also

realize that states like Maine and Massachusetts are very likely to pass ballot initiatives to regulate cannabis like alcohol in 2016. So we have a window of opportunity in 2015 to give Lil Rhody a head start in developing what will soon be a national, multi-billion-dollar legal cannabis economy. If we become an early adopter, that means more businesses will want to headquarter their companies in Rhode Island, which means more jobs and more tax revenue for our state. All of the newly elected state leaders ran their campaign on revitalizing Rhode Island's economy and regulating cannabis like alcohol is certainly one way to do that.

**DS:** Do you think that the victories in Alaska and Oregon will have any influence on the efforts to legalize and regulate cannabis in RI?

**JM:** Absolutely. It shows that the cannabis policy reform movement is continuing to build momentum and that cannabis prohibition is on the way out. It is especially encouraging to see those results in Alaska and Oregon given that it was a mid-term election when the voting population is typically older and more conservative. These victories show that support for ending cannabis prohibition spans ideological and age divides.

**DS:** Why should people attend this next event and what can they expect to learn?

**JM:** We invite anyone who is interested in cannabis policy to attend our event, which we think will be informative and engaging. Each panel will be followed by a question and answer session with the audience, so I would encourage attendees to come with questions and an open mind. In our first panel we are going to have a conversation about why our nation is moving away from prohibition and toward cannabis regulation. We will discuss the social costs of prohibition as well as the various benefits of regulation. The second panel will take a more in-depth look at some specific topics such as cannabis tax policy, the specific provisions of Senator Miller's Marijuana Regulation, Control, and Taxation Act, and what we have learned from Colorado's and Washington's experiences so far.

**DS:** How can those who support an end to cannabis prohibition help make this dream a reality?

**JM:** The most important action people can take is to contact their state representative and state senator and ask them to make ending cannabis prohibition a legislative priority in 2015. It is not enough for legislators to say that they support the issue. We need them to speak out and ensure that our bill gets the vote it deserves on both the House and Senate floors. I would also encourage supporters to join the Regulate Rhode Island coalition by visiting [RegulateRI.org](http://RegulateRI.org), where you can sign up for our email alerts and learn more about the issue. You can also follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

Thank you Jared, once again, for taking the time to sit with me and discuss the future of Cannabis in Rhode Island. I appreciate your efforts and am honestly baffled that the act of taxation and regulation isn't already practiced on a national level. With all of the current research, science and testimonials (easily accessed with the creation of a new piece of technology called the "interwebz") it should be considered a crime against humanity that the government continues to enforce such archaic laws and penalties on the cannabis community.