

In Their Own Words: Jared Moffat, Director of Regulate Rhode Island

What do you think would be the advantages of being the first state in New England to legalize?

First, there's historical pride in being a leader on important social issues like this. In 50 years, I think we will look back on marijuana prohibition the same way we look back on alcohol prohibition now. We'll see that it was a foolish policy, and we'll wonder why we ever thought it would work. Interestingly, Rhode Island never ratified the 18th Amendment, which established alcohol prohibition.

Second, authors of a recent RAND Corporation report on marijuana policy reform discuss what they call the "first mover advantage," which is the competitive edge that goes to early adopters in a new regional economy. We've seen with other economic sectors: whichever state moves first to establish a foundation in a new regional market will take home a larger share of the economic pie in terms of job creation, tax revenue and new businesses. Those are all things that Rhode Island would greatly benefit from right now. Virtually everyone, even critics, acknowledges that a system of legal marijuana is inevitable, so it makes a lot of sense for Rhode Island to get in front of this and beat states like Massachusetts to the punch. It seems like Rhode Island is always falling behind and trying to keep up with our neighbors, but this is an opportunity to change that narrative and be a driver of a new economy in the region.

What do you think the disadvantages would be?

The only disadvantage I can see is for the criminal marijuana dealers and the drug cartels who will suffer serious profit losses when they are unable to compete with legitimate businesses that produce a safer product in a safer setting.

If cannabis is legalized, what (if anything) would be fair to do about past criminal conviction records for cannabis-related offenses? Should racial and ethnic disparities in criminal justice consequences be taken into account in any way?

It's no secret that there is a significant racial component to the enforcement of marijuana prohibition in Rhode Island and the United States. An ACLU report looked at 2010 data in Rhode Island and found blacks were nearly three times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than whites, even though they use marijuana at the same rate. In some towns, blacks were nearly eight times more likely to be arrested for marijuana. I'm very happy that the Marijuana Regulation, Control, and Taxation Act, which is currently being considered by the General Assembly (please contact your legislators and ask them to support), would allow anyone with a criminal conviction for possession of an ounce or less to expunge that charge from their record. It makes little sense to hamper someone's life opportunities for something that the state now considers legal.

Dealing marijuana is sometimes referred to as a gateway criminal behavior, leading to more criminal behavior. Would you expect to see a decrease in other crime if cannabis is legalized and that "gateway" closed?

On April 1 of this year, a young woman was fatally shot in her car by a man near an elementary school

over an ounce of marijuana. Illegal marijuana dealers have no legal way to settle disputes and protect their business, so they sometimes resort to violence. When police conduct raids on illegal marijuana dealers and growers, they are routinely caught with weapons. Just like alcohol prohibition, marijuana prohibition has created a culture of criminality and corruption. The only solution is to undercut that violent, illicit market and establish a legal, regulated market to compete.

Marijuana is sometimes referred to as a gateway drug. Would you expect to see an increase in use of other drugs if cannabis is legalized?

If anything, marijuana's illegal status is what creates a "gateway" to other drugs for the simple reason that illegal marijuana dealers often have access to other illegal drugs. The same person selling marijuana to student at a Rhode Island high school is likely to try to peddle other drugs, too. Whereas with alcohol, which is regulated, the clerk at a fine wine store doesn't offer customers a bag of methamphetamine when they check out. Taking marijuana out of the illicit market will separate it from other more dangerous drugs, which I think is another public health reason to support legalization and regulation.

The idea that marijuana is a "gateway drug" that somehow makes people crave harder and harder substances has been debunked many times in the scientific literature. Most famously, a White House-commissioned study by the Institute of Medicine found that marijuana "does not appear to be a gateway drug to the extent that it is the cause or even that it is the most significant predictor of serious drug abuse; that is, care must be taken not to attribute cause to association." You can simply look at the drug survey data and see that roughly 50% of Americans try marijuana at some point, but only very small percentages of Americans have tried other drugs like cocaine, heroin and methamphetamines. The vast majority of people who try marijuana don't ever use these other drugs.

Moreover, claims about marijuana being a gateway make no sense in the context of medical marijuana: Patients often use marijuana instead of highly addictive prescription medicines like morphine and OxyContin. Medical marijuana is a safe alternative for patients whose other options are not as reliable or effective.

A recent study conducted by a Brown University research team surveyed a group of 200 medical marijuana patients in Rhode Island and found that nearly 60% of them reported substituting marijuana for prescription narcotics they were taking. Another recent national study found that states with medical marijuana laws had 25% fewer opioid overdose deaths than states without medical marijuana.

Read what Nancy DeNuccio of Ocean State Prevention had to say.