

Jeffrey Veatch written testimony
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I'm here to address the need for better prevention and the role marijuana use often plays. My 17 year old son, Justin, died from an accidental drug overdose in 2008. He snorted heroin. But for Justin drug use began at age 14 with marijuana. It is impossible to predict how one young person will react to his or her first exposure to marijuana. For Justin and thousands of others the marijuana set off a trigger and, in effect, became a gateway.

If you think marijuana use and abuse of other drugs are unrelated think about recent study findings. One showed that teens who use marijuana are twice as likely to abuse opioids, three times more likely to try heroin. In fact the findings show 92 percent of heroin users started with marijuana. The 2018 Annual National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that 45-thousand more teenagers were regularly using marijuana and becoming addicted at a rate of 17 percent. This survey found use rates of drugs were falling almost across the board but marijuana use remained stubbornly high. According to the study an average of 8,400 Americans aged 12 or older tried marijuana for the first time each day in 2018. This is an increase of 100 users per day from last year's study and the majority were between the ages 12 and 25.

There is lots of compelling research on marijuana's impact. A very good clearinghouse to gain perspective is managed by the organization Smart Approaches to Marijuana, a policy group formed jointly by former White House senior drug policy advisor Dr. Kevin Sabet and former US Congressman Patrick Kennedy. SAM's website learnaboutsam.org provides a treasure trove of current research that should prove compelling for any lawmaker involved in policy decisions.

Today the prevailing view among teens is that marijuana is safe. But the US surgeon general recently reported that no amount of marijuana is safe for teens. The University of Michigan in its recent annual survey Monitoring the Future found marijuana use among teens is the highest in 35 years with six percent of college students saying they used marijuana 20 or more times in the past month. This survey also found about 11 percent of college students said they vaped marijuana in the previous month. Use of vaping products to ingest marijuana has been identified by The Centers for Disease Control as the cause for a spate of recent serious vaping related lung illnesses.

There is an argument that legalizing marijuana will make it safer for users. That is not proving to be the case. In California and Colorado which were among the first states to legalize marijuana for recreational use, the black market for marijuana grown without regulations has outsized that grown for the legal market.

Recent studies also show that THC in marijuana is associated with numerous psychiatric illnesses including increased depression, suicides, anxiety disorders, cognitive decline, acute

psychosis and schizophrenia. There is also another disorder on the rise called Cannabinoid hyperemesis syndrome, or CHS, which causes severe vomiting and abdominal pain.

I believe legalizing marijuana for recreational use for adults which has been considered in New York State would be like inviting the kids to the party at the very time studies show that marijuana use disorders among teens continue to rise. New York State lawmakers have taken positive action when it comes to vaping by outlawing the flavors that have drawn teens into that habit. The state needs to maintain strong regulations to protect teens from marijuana use as well as providing more resources to support youth education.

My son Justin was an excellent student and talented musician with a bright future and was supported by a loving family. But despite our efforts his use of marijuana led him down a dangerous road that proved deadly. Yes, it's heroin and opioids that kill. They are a direct cause of the epidemic that is ravaging our state right now. But to ignore the role marijuana plays in drug addiction is like ignoring tobacco when it comes to lung cancer.