

Dear parents and families,

Given the recent passage of Initiative 502, Washington becomes one of two states (with Colorado) to legalize recreational marijuana for adults over age 21. Regardless of where one falls on the issue of legalization in principle, it creates a valid concern for the health and safety of our youth. Adding marijuana to alcohol and tobacco on the list of addictive substances available for retail sale across the state foreshadows a major shift in how we approach the drug as a City and community. A study by the non-partisan RAND Corporation forecasts that legalization will result in a sizeable increase in use of the drug across the entire population--especially among youth. The medical community is already clear that marijuana use has significant negative consequences for children who now will be at increased risk for marijuana use. To protect our youth, the Island community must come together and adapt to this new threat to insure our youth remain as safe as possible.

While we wait to see how this historic event unfolds, it is important to remind one another of the good news-- the overwhelming majority of both middle school youth (98%) and high school youth (73%) on Mercer Island have never smoked marijuana. We can use this fact to anchor the inevitable conversations that parents across the Island must have with their children. City Staff from the Department of Youth and Family Services (YFS) who are professionals in substance abuse treatment and prevention have a message they hope Island youth hear loud and clear:

The adolescent brain continues to develop until the mid-twenties and drugs like marijuana can have a negative, and sometimes permanent, effect—choosing to not use marijuana as a kid is a great choice for your future.

Many factors influence our children's decision to use marijuana. However, **parents have the greatest influence**. As you talk to your teens about marijuana legalization, YFS staff suggest the message be fact-based, non-judgmental and in the spirit of concern for their health and safety.

Here are relevant facts related to marijuana use that might be helpful in your discussion:

- **Potency** – today's marijuana is 4-5times more potent than marijuana in the 60's and 70's.
- **IQ loss** – permanent IQ loss in adulthood, even after prolonged abstinence, when heavy marijuana use begins before age 18.
- **Lack of initiative, energy and focus** – academic performance decreases significantly among marijuana users.
- **Driving Under the Influence of Drugs (DUID)** – marijuana is the most common illegal substance in traffic fatalities involving drug use.
- **Health risks** – marijuana use increases the chance of schizophrenia and heart attack.
- **Addiction and dependence**—approximately 1 in 9 who ever smoke marijuana will become dependent; chances increase to 1 in 6 among youth.

Parents should know that they are not alone. The City of Mercer Island, along with the Mercer Island School District, has several assets currently in place to address alcohol and drug issues among youth. The City's Police enforce drug laws related to youth use and have a school resource officer available to all schools. YFS drug and alcohol counselors and drug prevention specialists are available to students in the schools. The Communities That Care Coalition was recently refunded for five additional years of drug prevention efforts in the community.

It may be hard to imagine, but we should prepare for the emergence of a large-scale marijuana industry, regulated by the State, with commercialization and advertizing similar to alcohol and tobacco. Under this system, there will undoubtedly be many messages vying for your child's attention. However, let's make sure that the first and most important message they receive regarding marijuana is from an invested community – parents, school, neighbors and city working together to prevent harm to our youth.

They are our greatest asset.

For additional information or resources, please contact the [Department of Youth and Family Services](#) for education, support and resources at 206.275.7611 or the [Mercer Island Police Department](#) at 206.275.7610.

Sincerely,

Bruce Bassett

Mayor, Mercer Island