

Legalizing marijuana will cause harm

By Steve Alm

As the United States attorney, a Circuit Court judge and now the Honolulu prosecutor, I didn't give marijuana much thought. I was more focused on crystal methamphetamine, cocaine, alcohol and heroin and how they were ruining people's lives. The abuse of these drugs convinced me to create strategies like HOPE Probation to help people deal with their addictions and lead meaningful lives.

Seeing that Hawaii's Legislature is considering legalizing the commercial (nonmedical) sale of marijuana, we started researching how legalizing marijuana has affected states such as Colorado, California, Washington and Oregon, where it has been legal for as many as 10 years, and how legalization might affect Hawaii. What I found surprised and alarmed me.

To that end we invited lawmakers, visitor industry professionals, educators, health-care providers and others to an informational briefing in Waikiki on Aug. 29 about the impacts of legalizing marijuana. We learned a number of things.

First, marijuana legalization would immediately affect Hawaii's economic well-being. Tourism, Hawaii's No. 1 industry, would be seriously impacted. Leaders in the Japanese visitor industry warned if we legalize marijuana, Japanese tourists will stop coming to Hawaii. Full stop.

In Japan, marijuana is considered akin to methamphetamine, cocaine and heroin. Its use is frowned upon by society. There is no commercial or medical marijuana in Japan.

This is a precarious time for our economy. We are still emerging from

the ravages of the pandemic, and are now challenged by the tragic wildfire on Maui. The last thing we should do is scare away tourists from Japan and other Asian countries, and families from everywhere.

Second, legalizing marijuana hasn't been the revenue cash cow that advocates tout. A study in Colorado found every \$1 in tax revenue resulted in approximately \$4.50 in costs, ranging from additional health-care costs to more students dropping out of high school.

Third, the marijuana of today is not the marijuana of the past. Back then, marijuana had a THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) content of about 3%. Now, mainland commercial stores sell marijuana with 20%-40% THC with extract concentrates over 90%. It is a different drug entirely.

Fourth, wherever marijuana is legalized, usage rates increase. From 900,000 daily users in the U.S. in 1992, to more than 15 million today. The prevalence of marijuana use disorder in children ages 12-17 increased 25% after legalization.

Fifth, legalizing marijuana results in more fatal car collisions. In the Rocky Mountain area in 2020, 24.3% of drivers involved in traffic fatalities tested positive for marijuana, up from 14.8% in 2013. Additionally, 48.8% of teen drivers who use marijuana report driving under the influence.

Sixth, legalizing marijuana increases mental health problems (including schizophrenia) and hospital and emergency department admis-

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Steve Alm is the prosecuting attorney for the City and County of Honolulu.

sions, particularly for teens. Marijuana-related hospital admissions have increased more than 100% in Colorado and California since legalization.

Seventh, legalizing marijuana increases black market production. In California 70%-80% of marijuana sold in state-legal dispensaries was grown and produced illegally.

Eighth, there are serious environmental problems with marijuana cultivation,

including energy use, pesticide use, air pollution, land cover change, water use and water pollution.

Ninth, no state has successfully legalized commercial marijuana with any controls such as dosage limitation or preventing use by minors. Alcohol is illegal for minors, but society has never been able to prevent their access to alcohol. Putting a societal stamp of approval on marijuana would be telling our kids it's safe to use or it wouldn't be legal.

Finally, the current situation in Hawaii is not "broken," so let's not "fix" it. Marijuana possession has been decriminalized and medical marijuana is available. Violations are like a parking ticket, not handled in court, with no resulting criminal record.

We have been warned: If we commercially legalize marijuana, we will change the character of our state forever. Colorado has more marijuana stores than McDonald's and Starbucks combined. Let's not do that. Let's keep Hawaii, Hawaii, not put our No. 1 industry in jeopardy, and not legalize marijuana for the false promise of a few more tax dollars.