Legalization and Decriminalization of Cannabis

As Congress debates policy changes concerning legalization and decriminalization of cannabis at the federal level, NAADAC strongly urges Congress to solicit the opinions and recommendations of addiction professionals who treat and study cannabis use disorder (CUD), and craft thorough cannabis policy before implementing any change to the criminal or legal status of cannabis.

NAADAC Supports Decriminalization of Cannabis

There is a strong racial disparity between cannabis and criminal justice involvement, as evidenced by the disproportionate number of African Americans who are prosecuted for cannabis-related criminal charges. In addition to addressing social injustices and encouraging greater social and cultural equity within our society, decriminalization will also stimulate the facilitation of treatment for substance use disorders instead of punishing those living with substance use disorders. The intent of removing harsh penalties and punishments is to destigmatize cannabis use and therefore encourage greater access to treatment for those living with CUD.

Treatment has consistently been shown to reduce the costs associated with lost productivity, crime, and incarceration across various settings and populations. In 2018, NIDA estimated that the cost to society from substance use disorders was over $600 billion. The Recovery Centers of America estimated the cost of treating substance use disorders, including medical costs, hospitalizations, and government specialty treatment, to be $224 billion in 2016. Treatment is a preventative and cost-effective method for reducing drug use and reincarceration while also stimulating related savings in health care.

NAADAC Opposes Legalization of Cannabis

NAADAC does not support the legalization of cannabis for recreational use, largely due to the addictive nature of cannabis. Data shows that about 10% of those who use cannabis become addicted (Nora D. Volkow, MD et al, NIDA, 2021). A longitudinal, school-based study found that cannabis use was associated with poorer functioning in high school students across more domains – academic performance, unpreparedness, delinquency, and mental health – compared to alcohol use (D’Amico et al, NIH, 2016). Cannabis use among youth populations can impair cognitive development since the brain continues developing well into young adulthood and through the mid-20s. In the early 1990s the average THC content in cannabis samples was less than 4%. In 2018 it was more than 15% (Marijuana Concentrates DrugFacts). Now products advertising up to 90% THC content are advertised at dispensaries. This raises concerns that the consequences of cannabis use can be increasing exponentially in severity. Following cannabis legalization, the drug would inevitably become more readily available, accessible, and affordable to the entire population, specifically vulnerable populations like those with predisposed addictive disorders and our nation’s youth. Legalization leads to increased promotion of addictive products.

NAADAC Calls for Expanded Research into Medicinal Value of Cannabis

NAADAC recognizes that early studies have shown that cannabis can have therapeutic uses and supports the continued rigorous research of potential medicinal use of cannabis. However, it is NAADAC’s position that before cannabis is permitted to be used for any therapeutic or medicinal purposes, it must be subjected to the same research, consideration, and study as any other potential medicine pursuant to the standards of the FDA.