



## **Marijuana Legalization must happen in Wisconsin**

by Rep. Melissa Sargent

Good public policy often forms like a wave. It gathers momentum, at first with a ripple, then builds as congregating forces create something stronger. The policy finally crests when a critical mass is reached, and the politicians finally back the policy the public has been touting over time. Large pieces of legislation are passed when the people provide the momentum to create this wave.

Marijuana legalization is nearing this moment in the United States.

Last session, I was proud to author a bill to fully legalize marijuana in Wisconsin. I did this after extensive research and the realization that the most dangerous thing about marijuana in our society is the fact that it remains illegal. That is why I am re-introducing this bill.

We stand at a point in our state's history in which we must examine what has gone wrong in Wisconsin. Revenues are down, our racial disparities rank the worst in the nation, and our jail-to-prison pipeline is at a crisis point.

While legalizing marijuana would not be a cure-all to turn our state around overnight, it would enhance personal freedoms, increase financial opportunity, and lead to safer communities.

Adults choosing to use marijuana in the safety of their own home is a matter of personal liberty and freedom. As a matter of philosophy, the government must have a compelling reason to make something illegal in our society. If an individual action does not harm yourself, your neighbors, or your community; it is no business of the government. Likewise, Wisconsinites with ailments that could be alleviated through marijuana should have the freedom to use inexpensive and effective medicine that works for them.

As Wisconsin deals with devastating financial shortfalls created by Governor Walker, we must look at all available options for generating revenue. While Republicans demonize the use of marijuana, what is truly criminal is the money Wisconsin is losing by not legalizing marijuana.

As of today, each stop a police officer makes for simple marijuana possession costs taxpayers, on average, \$425. Over 650,000 Americans were arrested in 2012 for marijuana possession. That's one possession arrest every forty-eight seconds, and more arrests than for all violent crimes combined.

With limited resources, and an overextended prison system, it is not sustainable to continue imprisoning people for these offenses.

It is a travesty that we are putting millions of taxpayer dollars into victimless crimes when we should be doing the exact opposite: creating revenue and letting our police officers focus on keeping peace in our neighborhoods.



I have had countless conversations with people in the community about this legislation, and my message to them is that this bill is ninety-one pages of protections. A regulated and taxed system for marijuana use will provide structure where it is currently lacking.

Simply put, legalizing marijuana would bring security and safety to our communities. In Wisconsin, we have the unfortunate distinction of being the worst state in the nation regarding racial disparities. Nationwide, African Americans are four times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than Caucasians, despite nearly identical usage rates. In fact, in the city of Madison, that ratio is a staggering twelve to one.

As this policy wave moves across the country, Wisconsin must decide its role. Do we want to provide a home-grown marijuana solution for Wisconsin that would honor the personal freedoms of hard working citizens? Do we want to increase financial opportunities for our businesses and our state? Do we want to create a safer society for our children to grow up in?

Due to recent events across the country, ignoring the issue is no longer a viable option. Congress recently acted to repeal the federal prohibition on medical marijuana. A bipartisan bill to legalize medical marijuana was introduced in the U.S. Senate. Public support for legalization nationally stands at 58%. You can feel the wave reaching its crest. As is often the case, the public is ahead of the legislature. Legalization is going to occur, the question is whether the wave crests at the federal level, or whether we create a Wisconsin-based system that is uniquely tailored to our state.