

NH Union Leader

Lively debate over public health, safety impacts if NH legalized pot

By Kevin Landrigan Union Leader Staff Sep 21, 2025

Opponents and supporters had a lively, civil debate over the impact that legal cannabis for adults would have on public safety and public health in New Hampshire.



Public health, legal and public policy experts swapped views on the impact of legalizing marijuana for adult use in New Hampshire during a forum at the New Hampshire Institute of Politics on Friday. From left are Dr. Kevin Sabet, author and former federal drug policy adviser; state Rep. Paul Berch, D-Westmoreland, a supporter of legalization; and Dr. Amy Turncliff, a neuroscientist and public health advocate who has tried to persuade lawmakers in legalized pot states to limit access to high-potency marijuana.

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Dr. Kevin Sabet is a bestselling author, CEO of Smart Approaches to Marijuana, and a former drug policy adviser to Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

Those backing legalization offer a “false choice” between letting all adults have access to it or maintaining a national war on marijuana that subjects users to the threat of jail time, said Sabet, who supports decriminalizing possession and directing young users to mandatory drug diversion programs.

It’s naïve for the New Hampshire Legislature or any of the half of states without legalization to think they can create a safer state-run model that could limit social costs, he said.

“The reality on the ground is that this comes down to a race for rampant profit, it’s the same thing as Big Tobacco, Big Sugar, Big Pharma. The idea we are going to be able to put guardrails on this once it’s fully legal is an utter fantasy,” Sabet said.

Rep. Paul Berch, D-Westmoreland, the ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, said those fighting to keep it illegal here are kidding themselves as New Hampshire residents buy it in the rest of New England states where it’s permitted.

“I can drive eight minutes to Brattleboro, Vermont, and get whatever I want or drive 15 minutes into Massachusetts to do the same,” said Berch, a six-term member who was a managing attorney in a Vermont county’s public defender program.

“The argument to me about legalization is the wrong one. The answer is our youth and adults can and do get it, so what can be done to mitigate whatever costs come from it?”

Dr. Amy Turncliff of Ashland, Mass., is a neuroscientist and public health advocate who has tried without success to get lawmakers in Massachusetts to pass public health protections for families with loved ones who developed serious mental health problems after abusing cannabis.

“I want to commend New Hampshire for continuing to have this conversation and not jumping in to follow all the other New England states with people who are really feeling the pain right now,” Turncliff said.

“I talk to parents every day who are struggling dealing with serious, preventable mental illness, so I’m coming into this a little angry today. I’m sorry, but it’s been a rough week.”

Turncliff said the level of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the principal psychoactive compound in cannabis, is much stronger and more harmful than in the marijuana sold when it was illegal across the U.S.

Currently, possession is legal in 24 states and the District of Columbia. Possessing cannabis remains illegal under federal law, though President Donald Trump has said he's considering taking action to reschedule marijuana from Schedule I, alongside heroin and cocaine, to Schedule III, which includes ketamine or Tylenol with codeine.

"If you buy a gram of something that is 99% THC, that's 990 milligrams; the National Institutes of Health says a dose unit is 5 milligrams," Turncliff said.

"I am very concerned that people who are responsible for regulating this product in these legalized states do not understand the math," she added.

Lawmaker: It's much safer than alcohol

Berch said regulating marijuana would allow the Granite State to set levels for THC purity and potency as Vermont and Massachusetts have done.

"We make decisions about taking drugs that are harmful. I had a kidney transplant and still take medication with side effects that are massive. Think about people who have cancer who have a decision to make — should I take radiation or chemotherapy which are poisons or live out my life?" Berch said.

Sabet said his upcoming book, "One Nation Under the Influence," concludes that THC limits set by states are unenforceable since the drug is made by dispensaries that sell.

"Forget what those THC levels say on the package. We don't know if any of these levels have value, it is a total shot in the dark," Sabet said.

Berch said abuse of alcohol, which is legal, is a much more serious public health threat with higher social costs than marijuana could ever become.

"I'm not sure I am going to hear an argument that marijuana is worse than alcohol or tobacco," Berch said.

That's not a good reason to make cannabis legal, Sabet said.

“We are not doing well with alcohol as country folks, but if your headlights are broken, you don’t break your taillights just to be consistent,” Sabet said.

State Sen. Bill Gannon, R-Sandown, a leader in the anti-legalization movement, said Gov. Kelly Ayotte’s opposition to cannabis should help keep New Hampshire an island in the region without legalization, but pro-cannabis advocates will continue to try to make incremental policy changes

“This is why we need to have fully flushed-out discussions about this issue like we had today,” Gannon said.

Smart Approaches to Marijuana N.H. and the Raymond Coalition for Youth that oppose legalization sponsored the forum at the New Hampshire Institute of Politics on the campus of Saint Anselm College in Manchester last Friday.

Union Leader State House Bureau Chief Kevin Landrigan moderated the 90-minute event.