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THE US HOUSE PASSES MARIJUANA LEGALIZATION BILL– WHAT’S NEXT?

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In a historic vote in early December, a federal marijuana legalization bill passed the House. The law is known as the Marijuana Opportunity, Reinvestment and Expungement (MORE) Act. Among other things, it would remove cannabis from the federal Controlled Substances Act, expunge past marijuana-related convictions and require certain criminal cases to be re-sentenced. The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that legalization would generate about \$13.7 billion in net revenue for the U.S. treasury over the next decade. Federal prison spending would also allegedly be cut by nearly 1 billion. However, a reduced federal prison population would likely lead to a large number of potential beneficiaries of programs such as Medicaid and Medicare which is estimated to bring increased spending of \$636 million. In the Senate, the More Act has been called a nonstarter by Republicans, but the proponents of legalization have cheered the passage of the bill in the House.¹



“The effects of marijuana prohibition have been particularly felt by communities of color because it has meant that people from those communities couldn’t get jobs,” Representative Jerry Nadler, Democrat of New York and the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, said in an interview. Nadler spearheaded the legislation with Vice President elect Kamala Harris. States are given power and incentives to enact their own reforms, under the bill. Federal courts



would be required to release those serving sentences for nonviolent, marijuana-related offenses. They also would be required to set up grant programs to finance job training, legal aid and substance use treatment. Grants would also be set up for small businesses in the marijuana industry led by low-income and minority business owners.²

If put into law, the MORE Act would essentially create a shared federal-state control of cannabis legalization, although it does not compel states to legalize. The emerging potentially multi-billion dollar cannabis industry would of course be the big beneficiary. For one thing, it would remove current federal banking restrictions which have hampered the industry. However, those involved in substance abuse prevention and treatment can rest easy for awhile, because passage of the bill by the Senate is highly unlikely at this time. Any bill not signed into law by the time Congress adjourns on January 3 will have to be reintroduced.³



However, the relief in New York will likely be short lived. Most politicians believe that recreational marijuana legalization is an inevitability in this state. The Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins (D) said during a press briefing that *“it’s not so much a matter of if, it’s a matter of when and it’s a matter of how”* the state legalizes marijuana for adult use. She emphasized that the revenues generated by legalization are the big issue. Not only will they be huge, questions remain as to how those revenues will be distributed to include what she referred to as *“disparately impacted communities”*.⁴

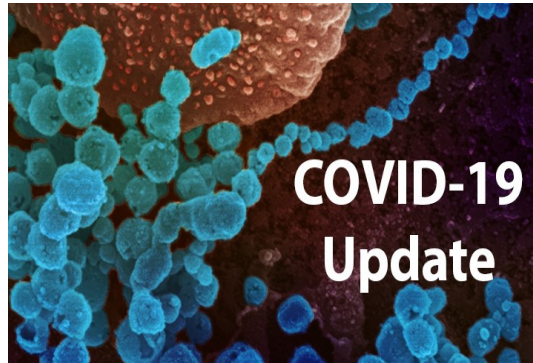
President-elect Biden has said that he wants to decriminalize, but not legalize recreational adult marijuana use. The fate of federal marijuana legalization rests on the shoulders of Georgia voters, Sen. Cory Booker (D-NJ) says. The Senate race in that state next month will decide which party controls the United States Senate. If Democrats win both of the run-off races, cannabis reform will advance under President-elect Joe Biden despite his opposition to legalization, Booker has said. His message to Georgia voters is *“Look, if you’re in Georgia right now, you will control whether weed gets legalized or not based upon whether you go out and vote.”* Both of the Democratic candidates in the run-off are in favor of cannabis and drug policy reform. Booker has stated that Biden’s decriminalization proposal is *“not enough.”* *“We*



have not had a war on drugs or war on pot in this country; we had a war on people—disproportionately black and brown people who find their lives economically devastated because of getting arrested for things that I saw done in college by privileged people at Stanford or Yale without any fear of retribution,” he said.⁵

UPDATE ON COVID'S AFFECT ON SUBSTANCE ABUSERS

Back in March when the pandemic first took hold, it was unclear what affect it would have on substance abusers. There was fear that isolation would lead to greater illicit drug use and that there was a serious potential for an increase in overdose events. Concern also grew that suicides would result from people experiencing a sense of hopelessness and despair. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that substance abusers would suffer more severe symptoms and outcomes from COVID-19 infections.



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Data is now available which unfortunately confirms most of the aforesaid concerns. Since March 2020, there have been significant increases in many kinds of illicit drug use. The Addiction Policy Forum (APF) found in a survey conducted of 1079 people nationwide with substance abuse disorders that twenty percent had increased their drug use since the start of the pandemic.⁶ Millennium Health did a nationwide analysis of 500,000 urine drug tests and discovered steep increases since March in levels of cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and fentanyl.⁷

Since the coronavirus pandemic began in February, data indicate there has been an average 20% increase in opioid overdoses when compared to the pre-COVID January-April 2019 period. The virus has created several socioeconomic and emotional stressors while social distancing has contributed to feelings of isolation and has contributed to a lack of support for many individuals in recovery. This has led to increases in opioid overdoses with devastating consequences.⁸

Gina Dalhem, a clinical associate professor and naloxone expert and trainer affiliated with University of Michigan's School of Nursing's Center for the Study of Drugs, Alcohol, Smoking and Health observed : *"What we have seen ... nationally is that people delayed seeking emergent care for non-COVID reasons. This has also been true for overdoses."* She went on



to state that hospitals were seeing lower numbers of emergency department admissions for opioid-related poisonings, but higher opioid-related deaths as compared to the same time period in 2019. Furthermore, lifesaving naloxone distribution has decreased due to COVID.⁹

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