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In February, the Seattle Times published two editorials in favor of marijuana legalization. Youth Eastside Services did not feel the editorials adequately considered the impact on youth and submitted the following oppositional editorial which was published March 3.

Legalizing Marijuana—Considering the Impact on Youth

by Patti Skelton-McGougan, Executive Director Youth Eastside Services

As we consider the legalization of marijuana, we must bear in mind the impact on our youth. Politics aside, the legalization debate is sending a confusing message that's contributing to a rise in marijuana use among teens.

When the *Seattle Times* recently took a position for legalizing marijuana ([see editorial 2/18/11](#)) and then [Ryan Blethen's column](#) later referenced the "high" praise the paper received for their position, the potential impact on youth was blithely dismissed.

As the head of an agency that provides substantial treatment to youth who abuse drugs and alcohol, I would venture to say no one talked with experts in my field.

The number of middle, junior high and high school students experimenting with marijuana is the highest since the 1980s, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Puget Sound agencies that treat substance abuse in youth, like Youth Eastside Services (YES), are reporting marijuana as the #1 drug being treated for addiction. And most experts would say that the legalization debate is one of factors accounting for this increase.

At YES, we work with youth in schools, teen centers and in our substance abuse and mental health treatment programs. Across the board, our counselors are reporting a change in attitude toward marijuana. Most teens see it as less dangerous and we are hearing them talk about the drug being natural, medicinal and "almost legal."

Contrary to popular belief, marijuana is an addictive substance. Moreover, the potency of marijuana today has doubled and even tripled when compared to that of the 60's, 70's and 80's—making for powerful highs and powerful addictions.

And if we are looking at costs, you should know it typically costs YES more than \$1,000 to provide substance abuse treatment to a single youth, to say nothing of the costs of recovery support. While insurance can some cover this expense, for those who lack insurance or income to cover the costs, it's often subsidized by taxpayers.

Since the *Times* is supporting selling pot in liquor stores, let's look at alcohol and the comparison it provides. Alcohol is the number one drug used by teens. Why? Because it's legal, they see their parents using it, it's more accepted and because they have easy access to it. Youth can get it at home, they can ask others to purchase it for them, they can even purchase it themselves (with enough perseverance or a fake ID). And unfortunately, some parents even make it available to their teens.

Local and national studies show that approximately 25 percent of teens have had a drink in the last 30 days. And 80 percent of those are binge drinkers. Not all teens who drink will become alcoholics, but those who do have a significantly higher chance of developing alcoholism as an adult—40 percent higher for those who start drinking between ages 14 and 17.

If we legalize marijuana, kids will see their parents using it, it will be more accepted and they will have easier access. It's not a stretch to say we will see an increased use and more problems with addiction with kids and their parents.

We also can't dismiss a recent Harvard study showing that marijuana has an especially negative impact on the developing brain. Regular marijuana use results in poorer school performance and attendance as well as loss of interest in other activities. In addition, pot use is associated with respiratory and mental illness, poor motor performance and impaired cognitive and immune system functions. Furthermore, addiction can be associated with increased rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts.

To look at only the tax payer benefits of legalizing pot is short-sighted and potentially dangerous. Marijuana is a powerful drug that needs full consideration of ALL its impacts and costs. And without a doubt the impact and costs associated with our youth should be at the top of that list—not relegated to a small consideration.

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Patti Skelton McGougan is executive director of Youth Eastside Services (YES). *YES is a nonprofit organization and a leading provider of youth counseling and substance abuse services in the region. Since 1968, YES has been a lifeline for kids and families, offering treatment, education and prevention services to help youth become healthy, confident and self-reliant and families to become strong, supportive and loving. While YES accepts Medicaid, insurance and offers a sliding scale, no one is turned away for inability to pay. For more information, visit www.YouthEastsideServices.org*

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