

HARM: Health Advocates Rejecting Marijuana in San Diego County

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Pro-Marijuana Influences Hurt Youth HARM Initiative Announced (Health Advocates Rejecting Marijuana)

San Diego: Marijuana use is the target of a new San Diego County health initiative, kicked off today. Health Advocates Rejecting Marijuana, HARM, seeks to reduce use of marijuana through increased awareness of its harm, especially to youth. “With THC levels in Marijuana on the rise, the drug is more addictive than it has ever been” Supervisor Bill Horn. Marijuana is the illicit substance most used by youth in San Diego County. One of HARM’s goals is to educate parents and the community to be aware of pro-marijuana messages, for example 420. “Parents and other adults should know that 420 is a code for marijuana use and that April 20th is regarded as a holiday to celebrate marijuana, often a day to skip school,” according to Judi Strang, facilitator of the HARM initiative, and 9th District PTA Alcohol, Tobacco, and other Drug Prevention and Education Chair.

In San Diego County 19% of 11th graders surveyed used marijuana in the past 30 days. (*California Healthy Kids Survey 2003*). “Juvenile crime is just one of the by-products of marijuana use; youth who use marijuana are also harming their maturation processes” says Thomas Alexander, Mgr. Juvenile Substance Abuse Program, San Diego County Probation.

According to a study done by SANDAG 49% of juvenile arrestees in San Diego County tested positive for marijuana and 82% had tried marijuana (*San Diego Association of Governments Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) project 2003*). Ninety-three percent of San Diego Juvenile Arrestee Monitoring (JAM) participants self-reported marijuana as their primary drug of choice, and 89% tested positive of marijuana on admission.

Driving while high is a serious marijuana risk underestimated by teens and their parents. Estimates based on Monitoring the Future data shows that of the nearly four million high school seniors in

the United States, approximately one in six (600,000) drive under the influence of marijuana, a number nearly equivalent to those who drive under the influence of alcohol (640,000). Marijuana is the second most frequently found drug, after alcohol, in crash-involved drivers (*DAWN, 2004*)

Treatment rates for marijuana nearly tripled between 1992 and 2002 in the United States, according to figures released this month by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Marijuana also harms school success. A study by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Center showed lower grade point averages, less satisfaction with school, negative attitudes towards school, and higher school absenteeism among marijuana users.

“Adolescent marijuana use is influenced by four factors: availability, affordability, acceptability, and attitude or perception about harm. When perception of harm goes down, use goes up, and San Diego County youth mistakenly perceive marijuana as less risky than tobacco.” stated Strang. “Teenagers need adults to send a clear message that marijuana use is unacceptable. Smoke shops that sell paraphernalia, and media messages that portray marijuana as harmless or trivial are hurting our youth.” According to the California Health Kids Survey more youth smoke marijuana than cigarettes in San Diego County.

Just one in five parents (21 percent) believes their teenager has friends who use marijuana. Yet 62 percent of teens report having friends who use the drug, according to a Partnership for a Drug-Free America survey of 2005. The rate of marijuana-related Emergency Department visits in San Diego has doubled from 1995 to 2002 to 1,174 mentions in 2002, according to the Drug Awareness Warning Network (DAWN.)

"Marijuana and young people is a match made in hell," said Supervisor Bill Horn. "I'm 100% in support of this initiative."

HARM is a collaborative effort by *Collaboration for Economic and Social Change*, Institute for Public Strategies (East County Community Change Project and Vitality Project San Diego), *Mid-City CAN (Community Advocacy Network)*, *North City Prevention Coalition Tri City Prevention Collaborative*, *North Inland Community Prevention Program (NICPP)*, *North Rural Prevention Project (NRPP)*, *San Dieguito Alliance for Drug-Free Youth* , and *South Bay Partnership*.

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