

## \$5.9 billion: time for an intervention

By Dan Harmon  
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The economic impact of substance abuse in Oregon is huge — \$5.9 billion per year as indicated in a recent study by ECONorthwest. Much of this cost (over \$4 billion) is lost productivity and foregone earnings affecting our competitiveness and prosperity. However, substance abuse costs Oregon's healthcare, social services and criminal justice systems nearly \$1.5 billion, making it the single most costly healthcare and social problem in this state.

Unfortunately, very little has been done to address Oregon's substance abuse problem. We rank among the states with the highest substance abuse rates and among those with the lowest response, despite a yeoman's effort by DHS. Over 300,000 Oregonians suffer from substance abuse - an epidemic by any standard. We watch as our youth are corrupted, our property stolen and more and more children are forced into foster care. We take small steps to combat meth and are surprised as it makes a huge comeback, fed now by cartels. Clearly, we need a more comprehensive approach with solutions that anticipate reacting forces.

Legalizing and taxing all drugs is not the solution. The economic impact of alcohol abuse, one of the most taxed and regulated substances, is eight times greater than the taxes we collect from alcohol sales. More importantly, we have been unable to show we can stop the abuse of "medical" marijuana through regulation. I can only imagine the disaster if we applied a "legalization solution" to drug abuse.

Today we are engaged in a significant debate regarding "medical" marijuana in the workplace. Combating substance abuse in the workplace is one of the toughest challenges for employers in this state. Workers continue to abuse substances at alarming rates and there are very good reasons to oppose any accommodation of marijuana.

However, "medical" marijuana is a much more symbolic issue: Is the State of Oregon going to intervene or is it going to let substance abuse continue to grow? What began as a program of compassion now scarcely resembles the modest program that voters approved. The abuses in the "medical" marijuana program are well documented and continue unabated. It is difficult to imagine anyone wanting to join an effort to battle Oregon's substance abuse problem if the state is going to allow this abuse to continue.

There is a comprehensive approach, however, and it includes, at a minimum:

- Stopping the abuse of the "medical" marijuana program.
- Prohibiting any accommodation of substance abuse in the workplace regardless of where the actual use occurs.
- Significantly increasing drug testing and the number of drug-free private and public workplaces.
- Significantly increasing the investment in substance abuse prevention.
- Including a drug and alcohol free behavior requirement in the new Oregon High School Diploma.
- Substantially increasing treatment options and treatment funding — including a Worker Treatment Program for uninsured workers.
- Increasing sentences for repeated drug dealing and property crimes.

- Substantially increasing law enforcement interdiction funding — including fully funding the state police.

In the area of substance abuse there are only two kinds of people: "enablers" and "interveners." Be an intervener by demanding action on this comprehensive approach. Your future and our state's future depends on it.

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