

INVITATION TO LEGISLATORS from Bridgeport, Easton, Fairfield, Monroe, New Canaan, Norwalk, Stratford, Trumbull, Weston, Westport, Wilton

Regional Prevention Legislative Forum

Tuesday, December 17, 2024
10am on Zoom

A virtual forum to educate our legislators about smoke shop & cannabis issues affecting our youth and to discuss policy options

RSVP: [POSITIVEDIRECTIONS.ORG/EVENTS](https://www.positivedirections.org/events)



Co-sponsored by Catalyst CT | The Hub, New Canaan CARES, The Norwalk Partnership, Positive Directions-The Center for Prevention & Counseling, TPAUD, Weston Youth Services, Westport Prevention Coalition and Wilton Youth Council and open to neighboring prevention coalitions

Agenda

- I. Opening Remarks
 - Welcome, purpose & agenda, regional collaboration & grant announcement - Margaret Watt, Prevention Director, Positive Directions-The Center for Prevention & Counseling
 - About the Local Prevention Councils - Melissa Perez-Constantine, The Hub: Behavioral Health Action Organization for Southwestern CT
- II. Illicit Sales at Smoke Shops - Jim Walsh, Chief of Norwalk Police Dept
- III. Lack of Formal “Consequences” for Underage Cannabis Violations - Kevin Godburn, Westport Youth Services Director
- IV. Importance of Potency Caps - Melissa McGarry, Prevention Director for Trumbull
- V. Addressing Siloes in Substance Regulation & Enforcement - Nicole Hampton, Alcohol & Drug Policy Council representative
- VI. Addressing the Needs: Prevention & Recovery Services Fund - Kaitlin Comet, Cannabis Program Manager, The Hub & Margaret Watt

Impact of Cannabis Legalization on Youth

The legalization of adult-use cannabis has normalized use and lowered the public's perception of cannabis as being harmful. The impact on youth includes:

- Increased youth use:
 - 13% increase in youth marijuana use nationally (JAACAP meta analysis, Oct., 2024)
 - 25% increase in frequent (“weekly plus”) use of cannabis among at-risk students screened in Westport between the 2022 and 2023 school years (Kids in Crisis)
- Lower perception of harm:
 - 49% of 12th graders perceive harm from using cannabis 1-2x/week, compared with 80% who believe vaping or binge drinking is harmful (Westport Youth Survey, Feb. 2024).
 - In reality, frequent teen cannabis use is associated with increased likelihood of IQ loss (8 points!), anxiety, psychosis, suicidal ideation, and addiction (CDC, SAMHSA).
- Increased harm:
 - Underage cannabis-related Emergency Dept visits and THC overdoses among Norwalk youth have increased each year for the past 3 years and doubled compared with 5 years ago (Norwalk Health Dept, March 2024)

About the Local Prevention Coalitions (LPCs)



LPCs are the state-designated entities for community-based prevention work, usually focusing on preventing substance misuse and suicide misuse and promoting mental health in youth. They are coalitions of 12+ stakeholder groups working together using a public health model. They receive minimal funding from DMHAS, typically between \$2500 and \$10,000 per year based on population size.

Illicit Sales at Smoke Shops

Illicit Smoke Shop Sales: Issues

CT's legalization of retail cannabis for adults has led to a proliferation of smoke/vape shops, only some of which are licensed, with many illicitly selling THC products. No appropriate criminal or civil procedures were put in place to address the issue. As a result, unregulated (and untaxed!) THC products are widely available in many places. In addition, many smoke shops are illicitly selling nicotine to minors.

- Towns are independently attempting to address the issue by developing local definitions, density standards, and ordinances.
- For tobacco sales to minors: Fines are insufficient to serve as deterrents, and clerks are fined but owners are not. For illicit cannabis sales: There is a criminal charge, and cases are handled in court case by case, without a standard fine.
- Some towns (e.g., Trumbull, underway in Norwalk) have created mechanisms to shut down repeat violators. However, when smoke shops are able to be shut down, they often reopen under the management of a “new” owner who is a family member.
- The added costs of monitoring & enforcement at the local level continue to be significant, without added funding from the state.

Policy Options for Discussion

- 1. To address illicit sales of THC as well as tobacco sales to minors, consider any/all of the following policy options at the state level:**
 - Fine owners in addition to clerks.
 - Greatly increase the level of fines for nicotine sales to minors to be meaningful as deterrents.
 - Rescind the tobacco license from smoke/vape shops that sell cannabis.
 - Give law enforcement the ability to suspend licenses or close down a business.
- 2. To address change of ownership by bad actors, consider:**
 - Establish a cap on the number of stores based on population size. In towns with a large number of stores, the cap would prevent a new smoke shops from opening up when one get shut down.
- 3. To address the ongoing need for additional enforcement:**
 - Increase funding to law enforcement.

Lack of Formal “Consequences”
for Underage Cannabis
Violations

Lack of Formal Consequences for Underage Possession: The Issues

Prevention science emphasizes the importance of ensuring that youth experience some type of consequence for illicit or dangerous behaviors. *Restorative* consequences offer an opportunity for early intervention. *Lack* of consequences enables the behavior to continue and sends a strong message to youth that the behavior is acceptable.

- CT's cannabis law makes no provision for consequences for first-time possession of vapes or cannabis – unlike CT laws regarding alcohol and other drugs.
- The RERACA law specified an optional warning the 1st time, and a referral to a Juvenile Review Board for a 2nd offense—if the town has a JRB. In Westport, JRB referrals have *decreased* since legalization.
- There is no tracking of warnings, so no ability to quantify how often they occur - or to determine if a single youth is being given warnings in multiple towns.
- Current prevention research finds that the majority of youth do not engage in substance use, and therefore *any* use of a substance should be seen as a red flag requiring immediate attention.

Policy Options for Discussion

To allow for early intervention and to send a message that underage substance use is unhealthy and illegal, consider one or more of the following options:

1. **Require a referral** for every instance of underage substance use identified by police, to be proactive in identifying and providing support to the youth's needs.
 - a. Allow each town to identify its preferred local agency for referrals (JRB, YSB, school counselor, human services department, etc.)
 - b. Require the referral agency to offer **screening** for both mental health & substance misuse, **psychoeducation** (including online classes), and **connections** to counselors.
 - c. Notify the family and provide resources.
 - d. Require annual town reporting of referrals made.
2. **Align the consequences** for underage cannabis possession with the consequences for alcohol (namely, fines and an impact on the youth's driver's license).
3. Allocate funding for counseling and psychoeducation from the Cannabis Prevention & Recovery Services Fund.

Importance of Potency Caps

THC Potency Caps: The Issues

Today's cannabis is engineered for maximum potency.

CT's RERACA Law restricts potency:

- 30% cap on plant, 60% cap on concentrates, 5mg per edible serving.
- Pre-filled vapes are specifically excluded from potency caps.

Local environmental scans of licensed cannabis retailers found no vapes less than 70% THC. *Unlicensed* sellers are selling products above these limits.

Researchers consider anything >10% THC as “high potency.” The higher the potency the greater the effects on mental and physical health - especially for youth.

Policy Options for Discussion

Consider any/all of the following:

1. Lower THC potency caps to reflect the science.
2. Apply THC potency caps to include pre-filled (disposable) vapes.
3. Ban disposable vapes.

Addressing Siloes in Substance Regulation & Enforcement

Regulation & Enforcement: The Issues

Multiple state agencies oversee substance regulation, leading to inconsistencies, enforcement challenges, and gaps in monitoring. A unified approach is needed to ensure clear guidelines, consistent compliance, and effective enforcement across all product categories.

Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services (DMHAS)	Tobacco compliance checks for sales to minors
Department of Consumer Protection (DCP)	Liquor & cannabis compliance checks for licensing, product and potency caps
Department of Revenue Services (DRS)	Alcohol & tobacco tax compliance
Local Health Departments	Cross-checking compliance with local regulations
Local Law Enforcement	Enforces sales violations, minor protections and licensing issues

Policy Options for Discussion

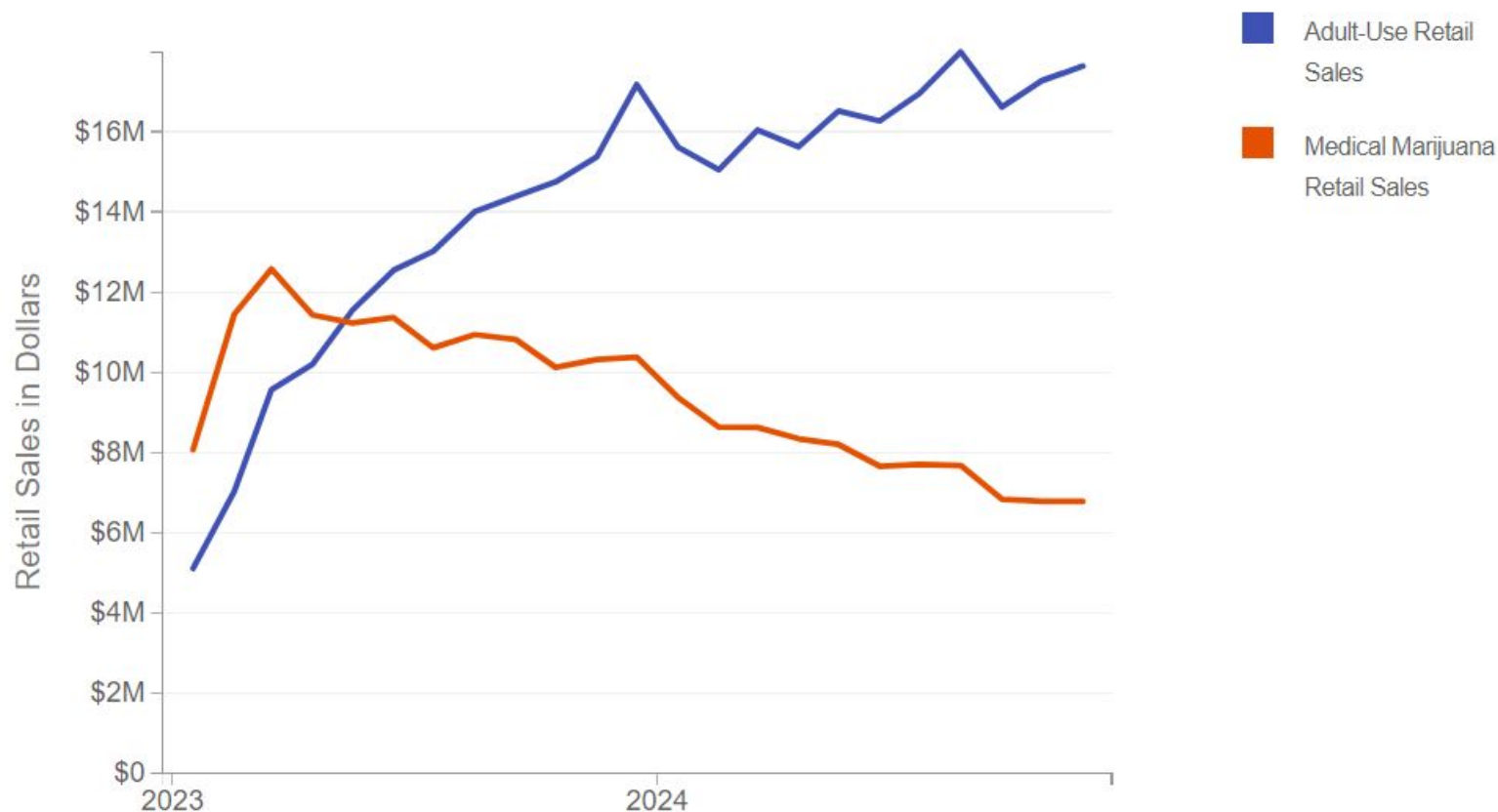
1. Create a Unified Substance Commission
2. Develop a Comprehensive Database
3. Clarify Enforcement Responsibilities
4. Enhance Cross-Agency Communication

Addressing the Needs:
Prevention & Recovery
Services Fund

Addressing the Needs: The Funding Issue

Cannabis Retail Sales by Month

Total monthly retail sales for adult-use cannabis and medical marijuana



Source: [CT Department of Consumer Protection, 2024 - Cannabis Sales](#)

Estimated Cannabis Tax Revenue for CT's Cannabis Prevention & Recovery Services Fund

One-month cannabis sales (Nov. 1 - Nov. 30, 2024)	\$17,632,642
Estimated monthly sales tax revenue (~20%)	\$3,400,000
Monthly allocation to the Prevention & Recovery Services Fund (25%)	\$855,000
Estimated annual allocation to the Prevention & Recovery Services Fund (12 months)	\$10,260,000

- We estimate the Prevention & Recovery Services Fund received **~\$10.3M this year.**
- **A total of \$570,000** has just been allocated to CT communities in the form of 10 Cannabis Prevention Coalition Grants, two per DMHAS region: \$57,000 per award, for **an 18-month period.**
- The P&RS Fund should be able to support issues like those raised today!

Sources: [Department of Consumer Protection, 2024 - Cannabis Sales](#)
[News 8 CT, 2024 - Marijuana Tax Revenue](#)