

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 28, 2019

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Public Health Leaders Urge Lawmakers to Put Prevention Before Profit

MONTPELIER – March 28, 2019 – Physicians from the Vermont Medical Society (VMS) and the American Academy of Pediatrics Vermont Chapter (AAPVT), the Vermont Association of Hospitals and Health Systems (VAHHS), and State prevention specialists joined Al Gobeille, the Secretary of the Vermont Agency of Human Services, to urge lawmakers to prioritize evidence-based prevention programs with dedicated, sustainable funding systems in place before they enact a tax and regulate commercial system for marijuana sales in Vermont.

Secretary Al Gobeille said, “As Vermont considers a regulated system for marijuana, we must make sure we have a robust framework in place that ensures our highways are safe and our kids are protected. There are so many people that are supportive of moving forward with a regulated marijuana market, it can be hard to be the person that says let’s slow down. However, we must focus on education and prevention to help Vermonters, especially our youth, understand the adverse effects of marijuana.”

In December 2018, Governor Phil Scott’s Marijuana Advisory Commission presented recommendations for a commercial system of marijuana sales that start with the creation of a substance misuse prevention fund in order to implement comprehensive prevention strategies across the state. Yet, the Vermont Senate passed S.54, a bill to launch a tax and regulate system for the commercial sale of marijuana, with no prevention programs or funding included in the bill. This week, the Senate also voted to strip all funding from the Substance Misuse Prevention bill, S.146, which sought to provide recommended prevention programs to help Vermont youth avoid tobacco, cannabis and opioid use.

Jeff Tieman, President and CEO of VAHHS maintains health and prevention should come first. He says, “The health and safety of our communities is critical. As a system of non-profit health care providers, we feel strongly that before passing a commercial marijuana bill, there must be a plan in place that includes a sustainable funding source for prevention to educate children and young adults, address health risks and maintain the safety on our roadways.”

Based on the experience of other states that have commercial marijuana sales, increased availability of marijuana and the normalization of marijuana use in Vermont has great potential to increase youth and young adult use rates. Jill Rinehart M.D., President of the AAPVT and also speaking on behalf of the Vermont Medical Society, is concerned, “Commercialization of marijuana gives our youth the wrong message—that marijuana as legal, must be safe. When youth believe the risk of harm from a substance

is less, their use of that substance increases.” And yet she says there is evidence of harm, “Youth who use marijuana are three times more likely to become addicted to marijuana than adults. Youth use is associated with decreased school and job performance. Marijuana has introduced many of my patients to nicotine (often combined with weed) alcohol and opiates.” Dr Rinehart was also a member of the Governor’s Marijuana Advisory Commission Education and Prevention subcommittee.

Holly Morehouse, Executive Director of Vermont Afterschool, said Vermont youth do not need increased access to marijuana and the state needs to commit to sustainable prevention funding for evidence-based youth programs. “The evidence shows that Vermont prevention programs provide a return on investment. For every dollar spent on quality afterschool and summer learning programs, Vermont receives double in long-term savings from reduced criminal activity and substance abuse treatment, as well as accruing additional benefits from increased high school completion and work productivity.”

VMS and AAPVT urge the Vermont General Assembly to oppose commercial marijuana sales in Vermont until dedicated, sustainable funding is in place to institute evidence-based prevention programs that prevent risky behaviors among adolescents.

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About the Vermont Medical Society: The Vermont Medical Society is the leading voice of physicians in the state and is dedicated to advancing the practice of medicine by advocating on behalf of Vermont’s doctors, physician assistants and the patients and communities they care for. The Society serves its 2,000 members through public policy advocacy on the state and federal levels, as well as by providing legal, administrative and educational support, producing a rich flow of news and information and offering member benefits that increase medical practice effectiveness and efficiency. For more information, visit www.VTMD.org.

The American Academy of Pediatrics Vermont Chapter (AAPVT) is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the physical, mental, and social health and well-being of the state’s infants, children, adolescents, and young adults. AAPVT works to achieve these goals by using the collective voice of Vermont’s pediatricians to improve the lives of Vermont’s youth through public education, research, child advocacy and policy development. www.aapvt.org