



Dear friends and colleagues in the industry,

It's rare to see an industry born from a movement.

Many industries know that there are policies they want changed that they cannot credibly address, so they create advocacy organizations and pour millions of dollars into them to prop them up and give the appearance of grassroots support. It's called Astroturfing. Astroturf is fake grass. But while it may look like grass, it's inorganic, doesn't grow, nourishes nothing, and is made of mostly forever plastics and noxious chemicals.

Cannabis advocacy is not astroturf. It wasn't created by an industry. In fact, just the opposite.

Cannabis policy reform is a movement. And like every fight for justice, ours was born out of suffering: the suffering of people whose liberty, children, homes, education, or lives were stolen from them in the name of the war on drugs. The suffering of those desperate for medicine for themselves or to help a loved one to eat, ease pain, or calm seizures. It rose against a drug war machine that has fueled government overreach, mass incarceration, discrimination, and inequity for nearly a century. All based on lies told about a plant.

Over time, the movement's integrity and moral urgency drew the attention of philanthropic funders who recognized cannabis reform as a civil rights, healthcare, and justice issue. Their support built the infrastructure that powered legalization, funded litigation, and sustained advocacy during the years before there was an industry to help.

Unlike astroturf campaigns, movements draw power from their independence and integrity. They serve people, not profit.

As the legal cannabis industry emerged, our movement's goals grew to include the right to safe and reasonable access, which requires an economically stable industry that is rationally regulated, reasonably taxed, and operating in a normalized legal and commercial environment.

But the work of our movement is not done. Prohibition still lingers, and with it, suffering, injustice, and inequity. Now, the industry that our movement birthed is in peril, and we know that if the industry fails, we fail together.

In short, we need each other.

Over the last decade, many of cannabis reform's philanthropic funders have moved on, and the industry has struggled. As a result, the independent advocacy groups that powered reform, already reduced, are in danger of closing their doors or shrinking to the point of irrelevance. That would be a devastating blow to the industry's goal of a stable, normalized commercial environment and to the progress we've all made together.

A strong industry creates jobs, generates tax revenues, and revitalizes local economies. These arguments were, and still are, powerful incentives for reform. But they cannot finish the job of ending prohibition. They don't speak to the deeper issues that first brought this movement together, nor can they speak with authority to address the concerns, including public health and safety, that many lawmakers and their constituents have about cannabis.

Today, a resurgent and well-funded neo-prohibitionist movement seeks to weaponize those very issues against us.

Right now, Smart Approaches to Marijuana (Project SAM) and their allies are backing legislation, and soon ballot initiatives, to roll back our progress state by state. And there is a reason they've made "Big Marijuana," meaning the entire cannabis industry, their straw-man enemy. SAM and their allies spread disinformation disguised as concern for public health, safety, and protecting children because they know that fear moves policymakers and voters faster than facts.

They also know that the normal incentives of any industry, reducing costs and maximizing profits, can undercut an industry's credibility with lawmakers and the public on these threshold issues. Their strategy is to force legislators into a false choice between your profit motives and their claim to the mantle of public health. They want you isolated in that fight.

Independent advocacy shifts the dynamic.

Rooted in integrity and good public policy rather than profit, we are the most effective counter to the neo-prohibitionists now re-emerging in the halls of Congress and state legislatures, in the media, and within federal agencies.

As independent advocates, we speak to the whole issue: criminal justice, civil rights, medical access, public health, and commercialization. We have spent decades building coalitions of healthcare professionals, clergy, law enforcement, civil rights organizations, and community leaders. We bring those credible voices to hearings, to the media, and into the rooms where decisions are made. We have written laws, run campaigns, and helped shape every major victory this movement has achieved.

But independent advocacy requires resources. And resources have been scarce.

At the Marijuana Policy Project, we have led the fight to secure 29 medical and adult-use laws, both through legislatures and ballot initiatives. We have helped ensure good faith implementation of those laws and defended them when opponents have tried to roll them back.

Right now, we are laying the groundwork for legalization in Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, and Louisiana, and we have a list of priorities that overlap with the industry's across multiple legal and medical states. Our team has deep relationships across legislatures, communities, and civil society, and unmatched experience in getting cannabis policy across the finish line.

Karen O'Keefe, who has led MPP's legislative and policy team for more than twenty years, believes adult-use legalization might have already passed in both New Hampshire and Hawai'i if our campaigns there had been adequately funded. Those are opportunities we cannot afford to waste.

NORML, the other major institutional pillar of cannabis advocacy, has fought for the rights of cannabis consumers for more than fifty years. I don't work for them, nor do I speak for them. But from my perspective, it's clear that NORML's potential is underutilized. They have the most recognizable "brand" in cannabis and supporters in nearly every state. Deputy Director Paul Armentano alone places dozens of op-eds and commentaries in major outlets each year and appears regularly on national platforms as one of the nation's most informed voices on the issue. Despite serious funding challenges, this year NORML led the coalition that defeated California's proposed cannabis tax hike and mobilized 17,000 legislative contacts on a single bill in Ohio to successfully block an effort to recriminalize much of what voters had decriminalized at the ballot box. That's impact.

Cannabis advocacy organizations do not work for the industry, and it's true that we will not always align or collaborate on every issue. But our independence is a feature, not a bug. It's what gives us credibility and increases our power over time. Anyone who wants to see sensible and lasting normalization in cannabis needs that independent power working at full strength.

I write today with real urgency to suggest that it's time for a deeper, coordinated conversation between the leaders of industry at every level and the institutions of independent advocacy about how we move forward together. That means renewed financial support, yes. But it also means better strategic alignment across our common goals and shared purpose as we confront our common challenges. Neither industry nor advocacy will succeed alone.

If you were the "CEO of cannabis policy," directing every player in the space and tasked with increasing shareholder value by securing permanent commercial normalization, and times were tough, would you cut your most effective team, the one that has delivered or significantly contributed to virtually every policy victory you've ever had, to save a small fraction of your budget? Of course not. But that's what's happening. Not by malice, nor by choice, but by drift.

And maybe you didn't even realize it was happening. So it wasn't your responsibility to step up.

But now you know.

So now it is.

Let's talk.



Adam J. Smith
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