

Marijuana use draws harsh testimony

House panel hears from Harvard's Bertha Madras on dangers of legalizing pot

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TALLAHASSEE — With Florida voters possibly being asked next year to authorize recreational marijuana, state lawmakers heard chilling testimony Tuesday about the risks of expanded pot use.



Bertha Madras, a psycho-biologist at Harvard Medical

School, told a House panel that states which have approved the sale and use of marijuana are dealing with increased emergency room visits, heightened teenage pot smoking and a host of health, public safety and societal changes.

"Colorado has found...the tax revenue is one-quarter of the amount of taxes needed to compensate for the rising consequences of marijuana cost to the state," Madras told the Health and Human Services Committee.

A ballot campaign backed by an organization called Sensible Florida is aimed at legalizing up to one ounce of marijuana by residents age 21 and older. It has already collected 10% of the 766,200 petition signatures it needs by February to qualify for the November 2020 ballot.

Another measure, Make it Legal Florida, has recently launched, helped by an initial investment of \$1.5 million from two major marijuana companies, Surterra Holdings and MM Enterprises, better known for its MedMen marijuana retail stores. It would allow "personal use" possession of up to 2.5 ounces of pot.

Madras is an opponent of legalization efforts and earlier campaigns which led to the widespread availability of medical marijuana in state, such as Florida voters approved in 2016.

She likened the drive to approve marijuana use to that employed by the pharmaceutical industry in the early 2000s, when opioid drugs were marketed as safe and non-addictive. There is no Federal Drug Administration testing or approval behind marijuana as a medicine, she pointed out.

"Voices of caution are ignored in the face of organized and aggressive advocacy, for opioids in the past and now for marijuana," Madras said. "I urge this state to be thoughtful and diligent before launching yet another massive human experiment."

Chairman Rep. Ray Rodrigues, R-Estero, said he invited Madras to testify before the Health and Human Services Committee to help inform lawmakers in advance of the ballot measures that could go before voters next year.

He said he intended to invite pro-marijuana speakers to future meetings. But Rodrigues said that Madras's presentation made him cautious.