

Working Toward a SAFER Marijuana and Alcohol Policy



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SAFER Alternative For Enjoyable Recreation (SAFER) is a grassroots marijuana policy organization founded in January 2005. MAPS kindly serves as SAFER's 501(c)(3)

agent of record, allowing us to receive tax-deductible contributions as a non-profit educational organization.

Our organization—like many other drug policy organizations—envisions a society in which the private adult use of marijuana is treated similarly to the private adult use of alcohol. And like many of those organizations, we believe the means to achieve that vision is the promotion and establishment of a system in which marijuana is taxed and regulated in a manner such as alcohol.

Unlike any organization, however, the overarching goal of SAFER is to effect sociopolitical change conducive to such tax-and-regulate efforts by drawing a direct comparison between marijuana and alcohol. Polling and other testing shows a strong correlation between those who believe marijuana is less harmful than alcohol and those who believe marijuana should be taxed, regulated and made legally available to adults. SAFER serves as a test-project to determine whether this is in fact a causal relationship through which we can build support for marijuana taxation and regulation by spreading the message that alcohol is in fact the more harmful drug.

Our mission, therefore, is to educate the public about the relative safety of marijuana as an alternative to alcohol, which is undoubtedly the more harmful drug both to the user and to society. For example, alcohol consumption kills about 85,000 people and is involved in more than 3 million violent crimes in the United States each year. (Mokdad, 2000) (Greenfeld, 1998) It is also heavily associated with the majority of domestic violence and sexual assault cases. Marijuana use clearly does not lead to such serious societal problems, and most research has found that using marijuana actually inhibits such behavior in many people. (Hoaken, 2003) Furthermore, alcohol use can lead to alcohol poisoning and overdose deaths—more than 1,000 Americans die from unintentional alcohol overdoses each year—whereas there has never been a marijuana overdose death in history. (Yoon, 2003) So why do our laws prohibit adults from making the safer choice

to use the next most prominent and less harmful substance—marijuana—instead of alcohol?

Not surprisingly, many of our pious opponents accuse SAFER of encouraging the use of marijuana. Well, if more marijuana use means less dangerous alcohol use and abuse, then they're damn right. As we all know, prohibition does not work. What we are seeing here is selective prohibition, and it is causing a whole new set of problems. Thus, it is time we address a fatal flaw in the laws of our cities, states and nation, and that flaw is that current law encourages and promotes the use of alcohol. Pardon me for sounding like one of the drug warriors—not to mention a prohibitionist circa 1920—but what about the children? What kind of message are we sending to people about the acceptability of alcohol use?

As a matter of fact, SAFER was created in response to the rash of student alcohol overdose deaths on college campuses around the country, particularly a number of them in Colorado during the Fall 2004 semester. It became clear that not only had the so-called "culture of alcohol" turned deadly, but it was being fueled by campus policies that not only made student alcohol use seem acceptable, but actually encouraged students to use it instead of the next most available, yet far less harmful substance on college campuses: marijuana.

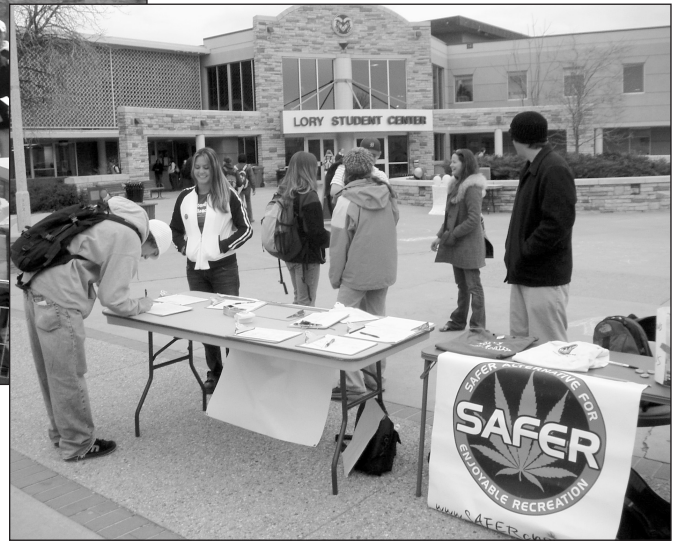
Our first project involved organizing students at the two largest universities in the state—the University of



SAFER Executive Director Mason Tvert featured on a Colorado FOX morning program alongside a DEA special agent. Photo by SAFER



Left: SAFER draws a crowd of reporters during a protest at the University of Colorado's Coors Event Center. Below: SAFER collects signatures at Colorado State University. Photos by SAFER.



Colorado-Boulder (CU) and Colorado State University (CSU). SAFER helped students at both schools establish a chapter of the organization, and—more importantly—initiate and pass student referendums at each school demonstrating the notion that, given the harm of alcohol compared to marijuana, university penalties for student marijuana violations should not exceed those for student alcohol violations. SAFER coordinated successful signature drives on each campus, followed by equally successful campaigns and GOTV drives that produced sizeable victories in both April student elections (68-32 at CU, and 56-44 at CSU). More importantly, the overwhelming success of the referendums put the two universities' administrations in the precarious position of having to cite state and federal law to defend their unwillingness to implement potentially life-saving alcohol-related policy changes.

SAFER applied pressure to the administrations throughout this project by implementing an innovative and intensive press strategy. We successfully capitalized on the opportunity to spread our message to a mass public audience, as we repeatedly earned coverage in campus, local, state and national print and television news outlets. Whether it was holding a rally in front of an administrative building or holding up bed sheets in front of the Coors Events Center on the CU campus (reading: "Coors is a dangerous drug dealer," "Coors kills. Pot does not," etc.), SAFER captured the ear of the media, initiating a much needed public dialogue about our nation's hypocritical stance and imprudent priorities when it comes to public policy concerning alcohol and marijuana. We will continue to lobby CU and CSU to adopt the recommended policy changes, as well as export our organization to colleges elsewhere in Colorado, particularly in Denver.

In May 2005, SAFER introduced the Alcohol-Marijuana Equalization Initiative to the City of Denver, and we subsequently collected about 12,900 signatures—more than double the 5 percent of Denver voter signatures needed—to place it on the city ballot. If adopted by voters in November, the initiative—now known as I-100—would

amend city ordinances to make the possession of one ounce or less of marijuana legal for adults 21 and older in Denver.

SAFER is currently in the thick of its campaign to pass I-100, and it is expending every effort to draw public awareness to the initiative and its message, not to mention the polls in Denver. The campaign has already received a great deal of press attention, and we have just begun to implement our volunteer-based, grassroots campaign. Along with a decentralized phone bank and large-scale literature distribution plan, we are actively working to raise the funds necessary to purchase supplemental materials such as yard signs and mailings, that could dramatically increase our chance for success.

Come November 1, it is hoped Denver voters will take a giant stride toward marijuana tax and regulation, by adopting a safer, more equitable marijuana and alcohol policy.

References

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