

## Pot smokers in Kentucky shouldn't be locked up, says Adam Edelen

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Democratic gubernatorial candidate Adam Edelen said Monday that while he has never smoked pot, Kentuckians carrying small amounts shouldn't be locked up for lighting up.

"I don't think smoking pot is a good thing," Edelen, joined by running mate Gill Holland, told reporters at his campaign headquarters in Louisville. "I have twin teenage boys who I talk to regularly about the dangers of drugs, but I think at some point we've got to trust the people of Kentucky, and we simply cannot afford or support the continued prosecution of recreational drug users."

Holland, a noted developer and businessman, readily admitted that he used marijuana in his youth. "Sure," he said. "It's not a drug of choice, but I went to college."

Edelen, a former state auditor, is calling for decriminalizing marijuana for people possessing less than half an ounce for personal use. He said the current penalties are racially biased, too costly and distract law enforcement from more pressing crimes.

"When we lock up people for up to 45 days for basic possession of less than a half ounce of marijuana, we need a better approach going forward," he said.

The Edelen campaign noted that more than 11,000 Kentuckians were convicted in 2018 of marijuana possession. It also cited a 2018 Cato Institute study, which showed Kentucky law enforcement agencies spends more than \$50 million annually on marijuana enforcement.

If elected governor, Edelen wants to:

- End incarceration for possession of marijuana for personal use, but allowing citations with fines of up to \$100.
- Automatically seal all past criminal convictions for non-violent and non-repeat offenders to help them immediately begin a new start.
- Reinvest an estimated \$15 million in savings from decriminalization toward opioid addiction treatment and recovery programs.

During the 2019 legislative session, a bipartisan group approved House Bill 136, a medical marijuana measure, after hearing emotional testimony from constituents suffering from chronic pain and other ailments.

**More:** Kentucky families battling serious illnesses want to use medical marijuana

The legislation cleared the House Judiciary Committee by a 16-1 vote but leaders of the House's Republican majority never called it for a vote, and the bill died.

Gov. Matt Bevin, a Republican, has spoken out in favor of medical marijuana during a forum in Stanford, Kentucky, in February, saying there was "incredible medicinal value associated with cannabis."

Medical marijuana is legal in more than 30 other states.

Edelen also said law enforcement disproportionately targets African Americans and other racial minorities in regard to marijuana.

"The approach we're using certainly punishes people of color," he said.

The Courier Journal reported this year that black drivers in Louisville, for instance, were cited for possession of marijuana at six times the rate of white people in 2017, even though both groups smoke pot at nearly identical rates, according to national studies.

In a review of more than 21,500 cases in which marijuana possession was the most serious charge, it was found that the disparity by race has almost doubled, even as overall citations for the offense have declined dramatically since 2010.

Supporting pot is becoming a political winner nationally as a growing number of Americans support legalizing either medical or recreational use. Sixty-six percent favor legalizing marijuana, according to a October 2018 Gallup poll which marked the third consecutive year that support has increased.

Edelen told the Courier Journal that decriminalization is an important step, but that there isn't enough political support right now for legalizing recreational use in the Bluegrass.

"We have to lead in the area where it's possible to lead, and I just don't think the political environment — though it is shifting nationally — I don't think we're there yet on full-blown legalization of recreational marijuana," he said.