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Youth top concern in pot legalization

'Current system of cannabis control is not working,' says government spokesperson

Michele Letourneau

Fast-talking former Toronto police chief and **Liberal MP Bill Blair** visited with Nunavut leadership in the capital April 12 to discuss cannabis legalization, saying decriminalization would be better for youth and would help decimate the criminal underworld's unregulated control over a $6- to $8-billion industry.

Blair, who is the parliamentary secretary to the **federal** Minister of Justice and Attorney General of **Canada** and to the **federal** Minister of Health, shared the main thrusts of the **federal** government's message and answered questions at a news conference before joining roughly 20 Iqalungmiut at a town hall.

"We learned the lessons of tobacco," said Blair. "Twenty-five years ago, we'd all be in this room and half of us would be smoking a cigarette. Now we have rules that say you can't do that."

Revenue can be used for public education, research, treatment and prevention, he added, something that can't be done in the current state of prohibition.

Blair said concerns vary somewhat by region, but are consistent on youth and cannabis.

"We have the highest use of cannabis among our kids in the world, the current law is not protecting our children, and because it's a criminal sanction it also puts our kids at risk of being criminalized and ending up with a criminal record and charges," he said.

"We've heard very clearly from the medical community of the health risks cannabis can represent for those under the age of majority."

And while cannabis will remain illegal for youth, Blair said it will be illegal in a more proportionate way.

"There will be an enforceable prohibition for every young person under the age of majority in the country. But instead of a criminal sanction ... it results in a ticket. It has far less serious consequences for kids," he said.

Penalties will be harsher for the illegal sale of cannabis to youth, he said.

Feds committed to working on mental health in Nunavut

The **legislation** is informed by 30,000 on-line submissions, more than 700 written submissions, and roundtables and discussions around the country.

Of 1,418 respondents to a GN survey, 75 per cent - 78 per cent non-Inuit and 70 per cent Inuit - support legalization. Of the respondents, those with children supported legalization at the rate of 69 per cent, while those without children stood at 81 per cent.

"We already know there's a very high rate of cannabis use here in Nunavut today. The cannabis that's being used is being done in a totally uncontrolled way," Blair said.

"This is currently 100 per cent controlled as a criminal enterprise, 100 per cent controlled by people operating outside of the law," he said, pegging the lost revenue at between $6 billion and $8 billion.

He said he's heard loud and clear from Nunavut leaders, including Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., Iqaluit Mayor Madeleine Redfern, RCMP, and Senator **Dennis Patterson** regarding mental health services and the lack of a treatment centre.

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"It is a significant issue in this community and something we're all committed on working on together."

Prohibition on edibles until 2019

As for the concerns raised by some citizens at GN-hosted pubic meetings about second-hand smoke, Blair noted that's in the hands of municipalities and provincial and territorial governments.

Business owners expressed concern about impaired staff and enforcement burdens.

"Thirty-one per cent of your employees under the age of 25 are using this drug," he responded.

Redfern expressed concern about edible cannabis products, especially those which might be enticing to youth, such as gummy bears.

"So while you may not be selling those to children, the fact that they are in that form has resulted in taking the adult marijuana to school, resulting in toxicity issues," she said.

"They will remain prohibited for 12 months after Royal Ascent. It will be absolutely prohibited to have things like gummy bears which are attractive to children," said Blair, adding the task force learned from Colorado's experience. "They didn't see this coming. The edible part exploded on them. Some people can't resist a whole tray of brownies. Or a chocolate bar, where it wasn't clearly demarked what the dosage was. People got themselves into all sorts of difficulty."

Bill C45 is still in the parliamentary process after completing a third reading in the **House of Commons** and a second reading in the Senate. Five committees are studying the bill from a variety of perspectives. A vote is expected June 7.

'Orderly implementation,' the government's catchphrase, means at least an additional eight to 12 weeks until lawful distribution.

The **federal** government has committed $161 million for law enforcement training and technology and an additional $108.5 million for public education.

Photo: **Liberal MP Bill Blair** - parliamentary secretary to the **federal** Minister of Justice and Attorney General of **Canada** and to the **federal** Minister of Health - addressed concerns regarding cannabis legalization with territorial and local leaders, including Senator **Dennis Patterson** and Iqaluit Mayor Madeleine Redfern, as well as RCMP and members of the public in Iqaluit April 12.

Credit: Michele LeTourneau/NNSL photo

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