

Oregon makes drug possession a misdemeanor

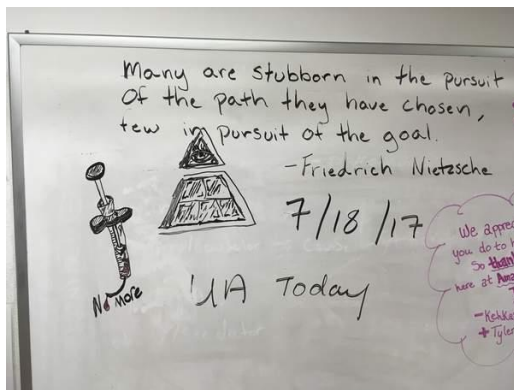
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Marquis blasts new law

By Andrew Selsky

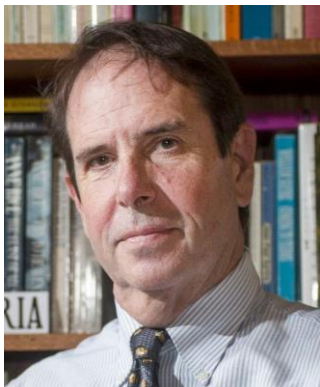
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AP Photo/Andrew Selsky

A sign in the Amazing Treatment rehab center in Salem quotes a philosopher and encourages people to quit using drugs. A bill signed by Gov. Kate Brown on Tuesday reclassified personal-use possession of cocaine, methamphetamine and other drugs as a misdemeanor from a felony.



Josh Marquis

SALEM — A bill signed by Gov. Kate Brown on Tuesday makes personal-use possession of cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine and other drugs a misdemeanor, not a felony.

Oregon joined just a handful of other states in defelonizing drugs under the new law, which was supported by some law enforcement groups and takes effect immediately.

Clatsop County District Attorney Josh Marquis, who spoke out against the idea at the state Legislature, said possession of the dangerous drugs is now as serious as shoplifting or minor vandalism.

“The message it sends is this is just not that big a deal,” Marquis said.

The district attorney called heroin and meth “scourges” in Clatsop County and communities across the nation. “They’re not just a minor problem. They’re a huge problem,” he said.

Marquis said felony drug possession charges often acted as leverage to steer drug abusers into treatment and drug court. “We know that people don’t seek treatment until they either bottom out or they have no choice,” he said. “By making it a felony, it does threaten people with some consequences.”

Jo Meza, owner of Amazing Treatment, a rehab center in Salem, applauded the new law. She has seen the damage caused by drug addiction in her 30 years in the field.

“There’s a huge crisis out there, and locking people up is not going to work,” Meza said.

Looking to kick their addictions, patients ascended a flight of stairs into Amazing Treatment, located above a Mexican restaurant and a barber shop in downtown Salem.

Inside the center, someone had drawn a syringe on a whiteboard with the words “No more.” Above that was a quote by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: “Many are stubborn in pursuit of the path they have chosen, few in pursuit of the goal.”

Meza said imprisoning first-time offenders with limited or non-existent treatment opportunities is not a solution. But the goal can be achieved with treatment for six months to a year with support from recovering addicts and training in how to remove oneself from the environment that led to the drug abuse, like a circle of addicted friends or relatives, she said.

“Jailing is not helping the problem,” Meza said. “All you’re doing is putting a Band-Aid on it and ripping it off when they get out of jail.”

Among the law’s supporters were the Oregon Association Chiefs of Police and the Oregon State Sheriffs’ Association, which said felony convictions include unintended consequences, including barriers to housing and employment. But the two groups, in a letter to a state senator who backed

the bill, said the new law “will only produce positive results if additional drug treatment resources accompany this change in policy.”

“Reducing penalties without aggressively addressing underlying addiction is unlikely to help those who need it most,” the groups warned. Another measure appropriated \$7 million that can be used to pay for drug treatment.

Linn County District Attorney Doug Marteeny had tried to convince lawmakers to dump the defelonization of dangerous drugs from the legislation, which also targets police profiling.

“To change the classification of this behavior from a felony to a misdemeanor is tantamount to telling our schoolchildren that tomorrow it will be less dangerous to use methamphetamine than it is today,” he wrote.

Those who have a prior a felony conviction won’t be afforded misdemeanor consideration, nor will people who have two or more prior drug convictions or possess more than user amounts.

The new law also directs a state commission to develop methods for recording data concerning police-initiated pedestrian and traffic stops. The measure is aimed at ensuring police aren’t stopping people based on racial or other profiling.

Marquis described the legislation as a “wolf dressed up in lamb’s clothing” because the drug provisions were tacked on to the profiling language, which had broader support.

The Daily Astorian contributed to this report.