OMNI

Understanding Virginians' Preparedness to Engage in Problem Gambling and Marijuana Use Prevention

Findings from the 2022 Community Readiness Assessments

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Introduction

With the legalization of recreational marijuana, as well as sports betting and other changes that have expanded opportunities for gambling in Virginia, the Office of Behavioral Health Wellness (OBHW) within the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) received funding to support prevention efforts targeted towards these two areas through SAMHSA's state prevention block grant and through gambling tax revenues in Virginia. As a first step, OBHW, in partnership with OMNI Institute (OMNI)—a non-profit research and evaluation firm that supports evaluation and capacity building for the prevention block grant—worked with Community Service Boards (CSBs) to conduct two readiness assessments: one on the commonwealth's gambling and gaming behaviors, knowledge, attitudes, and environment; and a second on marijuana related behaviors, knowledge, attitudes, and environment. Both of these assessments, along with a gaming and gambling environmental scan, will be used to help determine priorities for efforts to prevent marijuana use disorders and problem gambling and gaming disorders. As a part of each of these assessments, CSBs were asked to assess the readiness of their communities to address these issues.

The Community Readiness Model was developed at the Tri-Ethnic Center at Colorado State University to assess how ready a community is to address an issue. The basic premise is that matching an intervention to a community's level of readiness is essential for success. Efforts that are too ambitious are likely to fail because community members will not be ready or able to respond. To maximize chances for success, the Community Readiness Model offers tools to measure readiness and to develop stage-appropriate strategies. To learn more about the Tri-Ethnic Center's Community Readiness Model visit: https://tec.colostate.edu/communityreadiness/

Through the Community Readiness Process, Community Service Boards engaged key stakeholders through interviews and focus groups.

Key stakeholders may include:

> those **working in the industry** (i.e., casinos, race tracks, bingo halls, gambling halls, marijuana growers, marijuana retail stores, retail stores selling lottery tickets)

> those **interacting with the industry**, such as customers

> those involved with **policy or regulations**

> those **working in treatment or recovery** of gambling and marijuana disorders

Components of the Community Readiness Assessment

The design of the Community Readiness Assessment accounts for the various aspects of a community-wide issue and the community's stages or steps of becoming ready to address an issue.

Dimensions of Readiness

Dimensions of readiness are key factors that influence a community's preparedness to take action on an issue. The dimensions identified and measured in the Community Readiness Model are comprehensive and serve as an excellent tool for diagnosing a community's needs and developing strategies that meet those needs. These dimensions include:

1 **Community Knowledge of the Efforts**
To what extent do community members know about local efforts and their effectiveness, and are the efforts accessible to all segments of the community?

2 Leadership
To what extent are appointed leaders and influential community members supportive of the issue?

3 Community Climate
What is the prevailing attitude of the community toward this issue? Is it one of helplessness or one of responsibility and empowerment?

4 Community Knowledge about the Issue
To what extent do community members know about the causes of the problem, consequences, and how it impacts your community?

5 Resources Related to the Issue
To what extent are local resources – people, time, money, space, etc. – available to support efforts?

Across CSBs, each of the above dimensions were assessed and rated on their stage of community readiness, which is also a numerical score. The stages of readiness are defined below.

Stages of Community Readiness[1]

1 No Awareness
An issue is not generally recognized by the community or leaders as a problem (or it may truly not be an issue).

2 Denial/Resistance
At least some community members recognize that it is a concern, but there is little recognition that it might be occurring locally.

3 Vague Awareness
Most feel that there is a local concern, but there is no immediate motivation to do anything about it.

4 Preplanning
There is clear recognition that something must be done, and there may even be a group addressing it. However, efforts are not focused or detailed.

5 Preparation
Active leaders begin planning in earnest. Community offers modest support of the efforts.

6 Initiation
Enough information is available to justify efforts. Activities are underway.

7 Stabilization
Activities are supported by administrators or community decision makers. Staff are trained and experienced.

8 Confirmation/Expansion
Efforts are in place. Community members feel comfortable using services, and they support expansions. Local data are regularly obtained.

9 High Level of Community Ownership
Detailed and sophisticated knowledge exists about prevalence, causes, and consequences. Effective evaluation guides new directions.
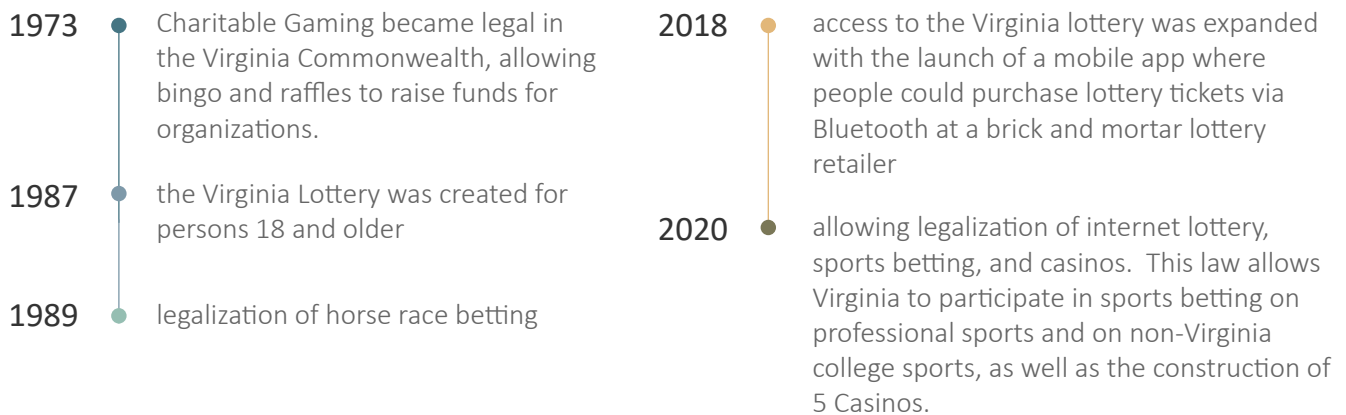
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[1] Readiness Handbook Adapted for the Colorado SPF SIG from: Plested, B.A., Edwards, R.W., & Jumper-Thurman, P. (2005, May). Community Readiness: A handbook for successful change. Fort Collins, CO: Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research.

Gaming & Gambling

History & Context

Gambling is an issue where federal law has always superseded state law. Gambling is legal under U.S. federal law, with the exception of online sports gambling due to a federal wire act and an act that outlawed financial transactions with online gambling service providers. In 2018, a law known as PASPA (Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act) which banned sports betting in all States excluding Nevada, Oregon, Montana and Delaware (which already had laws allowing sports betting prior to PASPA in 1992) was overturned, allowing States to enact laws to legalize sports betting in their state if they chose to. The repeal of PASPA led to significant changes in gaming and gambling laws across the United States, including in the Virginia Commonwealth.

1973 — Charitable Gaming became legal in the Virginia Commonwealth, allowing bingo and raffles to raise funds for organizations.

1987 — the Virginia Lottery was created for persons 18 and older

1989 — legalization of horse race betting

2018 — access to the Virginia lottery was expanded with the launch of a mobile app where people could purchase lottery tickets via Bluetooth at a brick and mortar lottery retailer

2020 — allowing legalization of internet lottery, sports betting, and casinos. This law allows Virginia to participate in sports betting on professional sports and on non-Virginia college sports, as well as the construction of 5 Casinos.

With the rapid expansion of gaming and gambling opportunities for Virginians with recent legal changes, a need was identified to better understand the gaming and gambling landscape, including community readiness to engage in problem gambling prevention activities. By putting aside a portion of revenue from gambling activities into a Problem Gambling Treatment and Support Fund, the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services was able to provide funding to Community Service Boards to conduct a needs assessment process to bolster their ability to engage in problem gambling prevention activities – including a Community Readiness Assessment to understand community perceptions, knowledge, and readiness to engage in this work.

Community Readiness at a Glance

Average Community Readiness Across All Domains

Level of readiness:

High   Low to none

Data not available

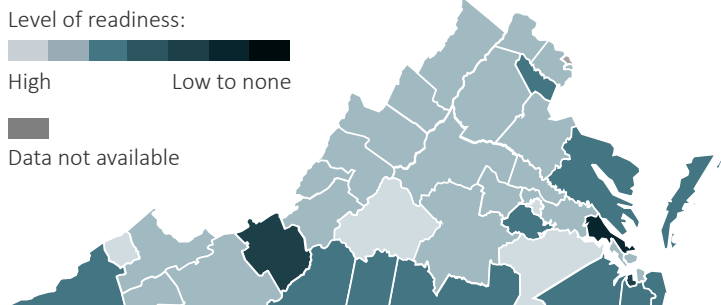**Average community readiness score across all domains:**

2.7 out of 9
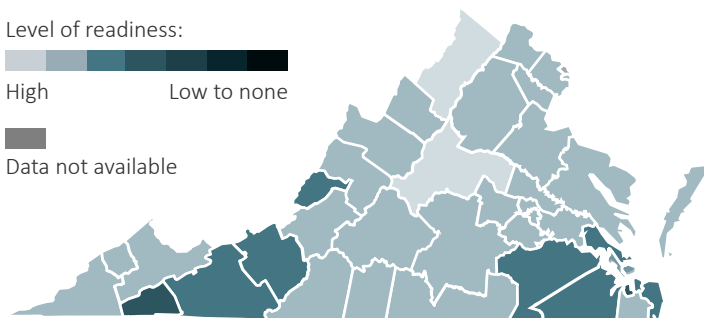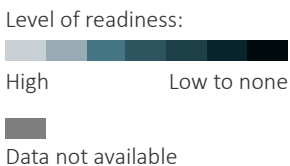
What this says:
Vague Awareness - Most feel that there is a local concern, but there is no immediate motivation to do anything about it.

Overall CSBs have little awareness of problem gambling as an issue in their communities. It is seen as less pressing compared to other issues their communities face that come with high fatality rates, like the ongoing opioid epidemic, rise in fentanyl, and the mental health crisis exacerbated by COVID-19. While problem gambling shares many of the same risk and protective factors as problems related to alcohol, opioid, tobacco, and other substance use, it is not recognized by communities as such. Rather, communities share an understanding of problem gambling as an isolated and individual issue that does not impact communities at large.

Community Knowledge of Efforts

CSB Readiness Based on Community Knowledge of Efforts

Level of readiness:

High   Low to none

Data not available

Average score for this domain:

2.9 out of 9

What this says:
A few members of the community have heard about efforts, but the extent of their knowledge is limited.
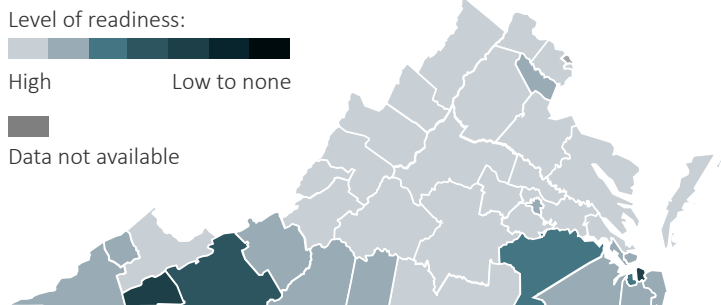
Most communities have little to no knowledge of current efforts around addressing problem gambling, nor do they demonstrate knowledge of the need for such efforts. Those with personal connections to individuals in need of problem gambling treatment services, those within the prevention and addiction treatment fields, as well as those more broadly working in human services, were seen as more knowledgeable than the general community. Community knowledge of efforts was generally higher among communities that have seen local proposals, policy changes, or developments leading to increased opportunities for gaming and gambling, such as those with planned casinos. This knowledge is likely stemming from increased social discourse related to these developments, such as news coverage.

> "...[W]e found that those who work in the field of providing support to youth and/or families are vaguely aware of efforts and the need for efforts, while those in the wider community seem to have little or no awareness of the need for efforts to address problematic gaming and gambling and are not aware of existing efforts."
> — Region 1 CSB

Leadership

Community Readiness Based on Leadership

Level of readiness:

High   Low to none

Data not available

Average score for this domain:

2.0 out of 9

What this says:
Leadership believes that gaming and gambling is not a concern in their community.
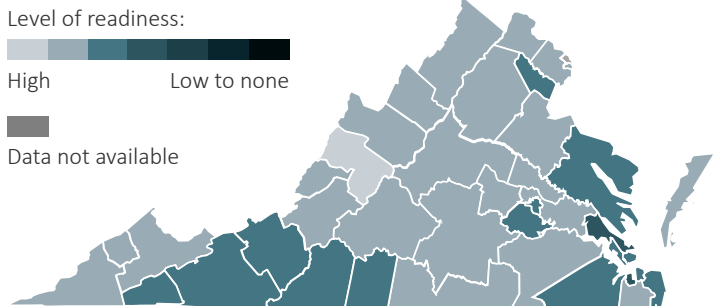
The stance of leadership on gaming and gambling is unknown or leaders have no recognition of problem gambling. Concerns about increased gaming and gambling opportunities are not raised by leadership, with leaders instead focusing on the economic benefits that gaming and gambling can bring to their communities by increasing local revenue and jobs. The complex reality that gaming and gambling establishments, especially casinos, will create economic opportunity, while also creating risk to individuals and the community, is not well understood. The role prevention efforts can have in mitigating community risk – without removing those establishments – is largely absent from these conversations.

Some communities found leaders hard to engage in the assessment process itself. This lack of engagement or disconnect between community members and leaders can lead to speculation about leaders' motivations and stances, contributing to mistrust and decision-making that may not reflect community needs and desires. Disconnect hampers widespread adoption and support of prevention work, which may put communities at a greater risk for the negative consequences of increased gaming and gambling opportunities. Collaboration and compromise between leadership and community will help build trust and a path for integrating prevention work into a changing climate of gaming and gambling.

> *"Some participants wished that leaders would address it openly and honestly to raise awareness about the upcoming casinos and some worry that residents don't have an understanding of potential consequences. Some participants also noted a lack of trust in state and local leadership to be truthful about gambling – and that leadership is only interested in the revenues and not the impact on people's lives."*
> *— Region 5 CSB*

Community Climate

Community Readiness Based on Community Climate

Level of readiness:

High   Low to none

Data not available

Average score for this domain:

2.7 out of 9

What this says:
Community climate is neutral, disinterested, or believes that gaming and gambling does not alter the community as a whole.

Communities tend to have neutral opinions about gaming and gambling. Disinterest and a general lack of concern were shared, with many perceiving gaming and gambling as harmless, social, and fun. Given the recent statutory changes to gaming and gambling in the state, there's a sense that because it is legal, it must be safe to engage in. However, a clear split exists between views on charitable gaming as compared with gaming or gambling hosted by for-profits. While charitable gaming is viewed positively and even as a way to support the community, gaming or gambling hosted by for-profits feels riskier or potentially predatory.

> *"Those involved in charitable gaming were keenly aware of all regulations, how their games are a social outlet for many, and believe that there is no real problem gambling involved with Bingo. But they do think there is more risk of addiction with electronic pull tabs, skilled games, and other types of high stakes gambling."*
> *— Region 5 CSB*

Problem gambling is viewed as an individual problem. There is recognition that some individuals experience negative consequences of gaming and gambling, but it is not seen as a community level problem. Some view gaming and gambling as a personal choice or right, not recognizing the risks and potential for addiction and family- and community-level impacts problem gambling can have. While communities note that the environment is changing, with more opportunities to game and gamble than before, there is little recognition of how increased opportunities would lead to increased problem gambling impacts. Building community buy-in for gaming and gambling prevention efforts will require shifting opinions on the potential risks of gaming and gambling and viewing it as a community-wide issue as opposed to an isolated, individual issue.

> *"The prevailing attitude … is that it is mostly accepted… it appears that many believe that the community does not see a problem with gambling and does not talk about problem gambling unless an individual is affected personally...the perception of harm is generally low."*
> *– Region 2 CSB*

> *"Overall, there is some awareness of problem gambling, but most feel it is a personal choice."*
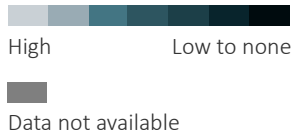> *– Region 3 CSB*

> *"Some were indifferent altogether and feel it is an individual's right to gamble if it is available."*
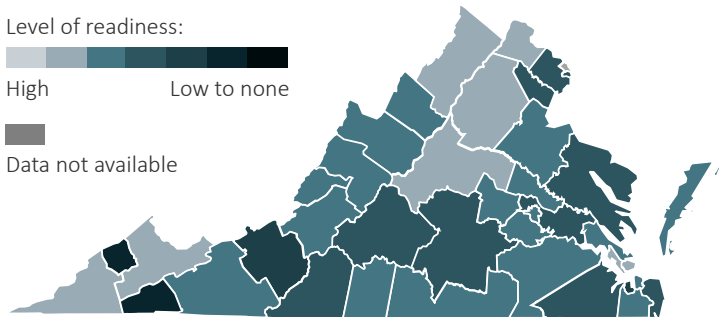> *– Region 5 CSB*

Community Knowledge About the Issue

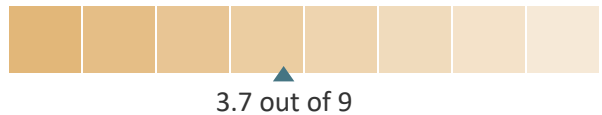**Community Readiness Based on Community Knowledge About the Issue**

Level of readiness:

High   Low to none

Data not available

Average score for this domain:

3.7 out of 9

What this says:
A few in the community have basic knowledge of gaming and gambling, and recognize that gaming and gambling occurs locally, but information and/ or access to information is lacking.
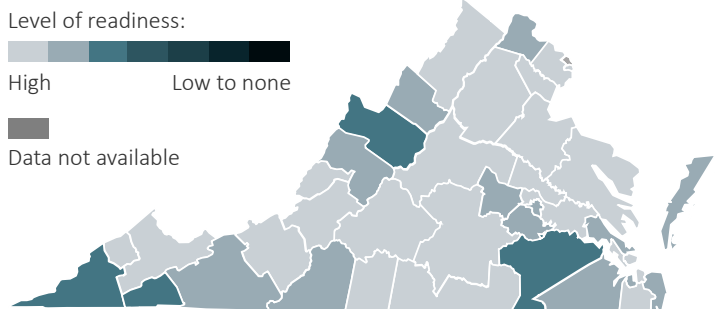
Overall, communities are not concerned about gaming and gambling and have little to no knowledge of the issue. Like the Community Knowledge of Efforts, those in human services fields have some knowledge of the issue and those with personal connections to individuals in need of gambling treatment services shared concerns. Of notable concern for prevention, some communities showed active resistance to addressing, learning more, or sharing concern about gaming and gambling. This resistance may come from a place of fatigue: living through COVID, social unrest, and increasing knowledge about urgent and complex social problems. As a few communities noted, this may be a more "hidden" social problem at this time and therefore seen as less pressing compared to more visible, widely publicized problems like the opioid epidemic and the rise of fentanyl where impacts – namely fatalities – raise greater concern. There is the perception that prevention is constrained and must choose which problem areas to work on (and which to ignore) and that public buy-in is required for any action to take place. Prevention is most effective when data, planning, and interventions are introduced as early as possible and should not only occur after prevalence increases and a community is impacted.

Some communities express concern about the impact of problem gambling on specific populations, namely youth, older adults, people of color, and people of lower socioeconomic status. While little is known about prevalence at a local or state level for these specific populations, these concerns align with the larger body of research around populations most at risk for and affected by problem gambling. A few communities associated social problems like "crime," "poverty," "prostitution," "increased drug use," and "blight" with casino gambling opportunities. The fears and concerns, while sometimes rooted in stigma, can be motivating, leading communities to seek further information and share their learnings widely. Finding reliable sources to build community capacity to understand the issue and drive decision-making, organizing, and support efforts will be key in growing prevention work on this issue.

> *"My community does not see gaming and gambling as high priority at this time. If the community is affected by these risks, it is extremely hidden. You rarely hear stories of families being impacted by these behaviors, but you do hear about suicides, overdose, and mental health issues, which is what people are more eager to focus on at this time."*
> *— Region 4 CSB*

Resources Related to the Issue

Community Readiness Based on Resources Related to the Issue

Level of readiness:

High ——————————— Low to none

Data not available

Average score for this domain:
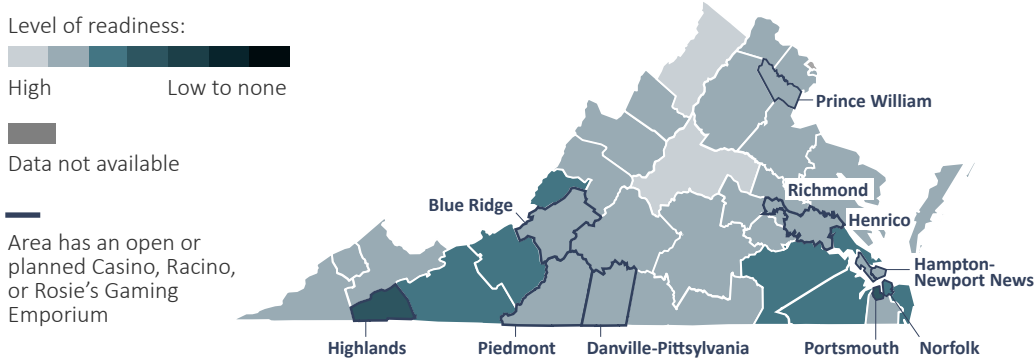
2.0 out of 9

What this says:
There are no resources available for dealing with gaming and gambling.

Communities generally were unable to identify any resources related to problem gambling. When participants were able to identify resources, they tended to be able to name basic resources, like the Virginia Problem Gambling Hotline – which is occasionally printed on tickets and some signs and advertisements. More specific resources, including locally available resources, are largely unknown to community members. Communities expressed a general interest in local resources and sharing those resources, as well as concern about having a lack of them. As seen in other domains, participants in the human services field have more awareness of resources. Readily available and widely shared resources are needed to support communities and individuals given the increasing opportunities to game and gamble across the state. While most communities think first about resources for individuals in need of gambling treatment services, educational resources on responsible gambling and local data on prevalence are needed as well. Investing in building resources now positions communities to better act and provide support to loved ones and community members. Communities that are well-resourced are better poised to respond to local needs that increased gaming and gambling opportunities may bring.

> *"Responses around the question of available resources for problem gambling were mixed. Half of those interviewed believed there are available support groups and counseling, such as Gamblers Anonymous. (In fact, the closest GA support group identified was in Portsmouth). Two persons believe there is nothing at all available while three stated that they knew of the existing hotline to seek help."*
> *— Region 5 CSB*

Spotlight: Community Readiness Levels within Communities with Dedicated Gaming and Gambling Establishments

Community Readiness Based on Community Knowledge About the Issue

Level of readiness:

High   Low to none

Data not available

Area has an open or planned Casino, Racino, or Rosie's Gaming Emporium

Prince William

Blue Ridge

Richmond

Henrico

Hampton-Newport News

Highlands   Piedmont   Danville-Pittsylvania   Portsmouth   Norfolk

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Average Community Readiness scores among **CSBs with a current or planned Casino, Racino, or Rosie's Gaming Emporium** were higher across all domains when **compared to those without a dedicated gambling establishment.**

OVERALL	EFFORTS	LEADERSHIP	CLIMATE	KNOWLEDGE	RESOURCES
3 / 2.6	2.9 / 2.8	3 / 1.7	3.1 / 2.6	3.9 / 3.6	2.2 / 2
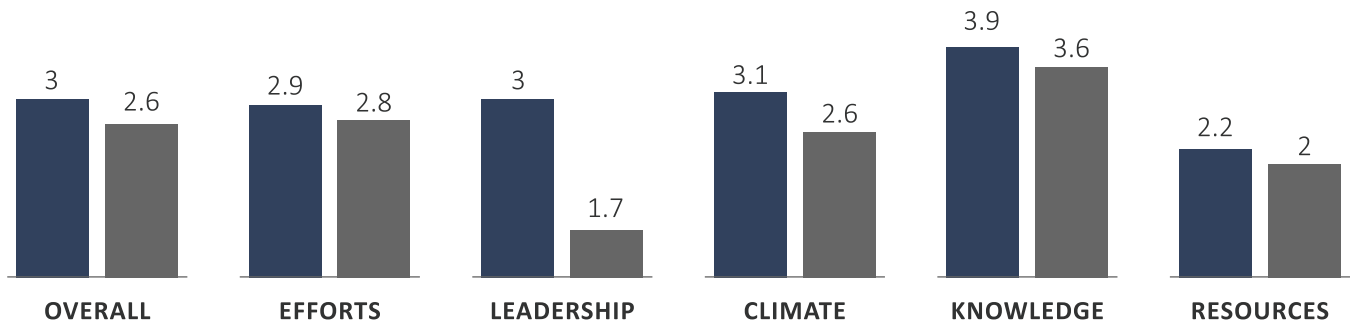
Levels of community readiness across communities with gaming and gambling establishments, including Rosie's Gaming Emporiums, or planned Casinos, were higher than among communities without. Scattered throughout Virginia, these dedicated gambling establishments were found in the Highlands, Blue Ridge, Piedmont, Danville-Pittsylvania, Prince William, Richmond, Henrico, Hampton-Newport News, Norfolk, and Portsmouth CSB catchment areas. Most of these communities recognize the changing climate and environment around gaming and gambling and noted that there is movement among some community members to address problem gambling related matters in response to casino developments, but that community-wide knowledge is still lacking.

> *"There is a small group of dedicated individuals within our community and prevention coalition who have been active at town council meetings and providing resources and recommendations to our strategies and activities, but overall community members don't know about the causes, prevalence, and concerns about gambling and gaming in our community."-*
> *— Region 2 CSB*

CSBs intentionally outreached both to community leaders and those within the gaming/gambling industry to participate in this process. CSBs invited their input, recognizing the importance of their perspectives and the significance of this opportunity to build relationships for future local prevention efforts. There was great disappointment when leadership and industry voice was missing, with mistrust both contributing to their lack of willingness to engage and building from that lack of involvement. Leadership, they shared, was more focused on the economic benefits that establishments, especially Casinos, will bring to their communities and were resistant to acknowledging any potential harm that these businesses will create.

> *"There is not a great deal of trust in community leadership, given that most residents of Norfolk seemed to feel that its leadership has been less than transparent regarding the casino referendums. I think most residents are awaiting the repercussions of the incoming casino and are suspicious of leaders touting solely the financial benefits."*
> *— Region 5 CSB*

> *"A definite challenge to conducting this assessment was the lack of willingness of city leadership to participate in the interviews. What is normally a very collaborative local government was not particularly open to discussing the current gambling environment, perhaps due to the economic and political impacts it has, as well as the precarious situation of the developing casinos in neighboring jurisdictions."*
> *— Region 5 CSB*

When attempting to engage gambling industry professionals into the conversations, many CSBs were faced with defensiveness and general guardedness, with individuals and businesses being hesitant or unwilling to participate in the process for fear of being perceived poorly.

> *"...[W]e did have business owners or Rosie's employees and management that did not participate because they felt targeted due to their participation in gaming and gambling."*
> *— Region 3 CSB*

Building and sustaining relationships between leaders, industry, and community members is a vital part in establishing a foundation for effective prevention efforts, where gambling establishments can exist while efforts are also in place to mitigate harm done by their presence.

Next Steps in Preparing for Problem Gambling Prevention

Set the stage for early intervention: There is low knowledge and concern about gaming and gambling in communities. Gaming and gambling is not viewed as an issue in many communities. Communication around the need for prevention activities should center a narrative that the work should begin *before there is an issue* and efforts should be in place to *prevent the issue from building*. Data collection tools should be built up and expanded to include measures around gaming and gambling to ensure communities are able to engage in data-driven decision-making and to set up systems to track the impact of gambling legalization on behavioral health outcomes.

> "The community is unaware of the need and has very little data to justify the need."
> – Region 3 CSB
>
> "Gambling or gaming is not routinely asked about on the initial intake for local mental health services and potentially adding a question about this topic could give valuable insight and data into whether this is an issue."
> – Region 1 CSB

Reframe the conversation to focus on "responsible gambling": The economic benefits, including increased revenue and added jobs, of large gambling establishments such as Casinos are centered in discourse, including among community leaders. A harm reduction approach should be taken, re-framing the conversation to focus on "responsible gambling," to mitigate impacts of increased opportunities for gaming and gambling and increase the potential for buy-in from community leaders and industry professionals.

Increase understanding of root causes of problem gambling and shift perception from it being an individual's choice: There is a significant need for community education around issues related to gaming and gambling. Problem gambling is being viewed as an individual problem and often a "personal choice." Efforts should be made to shift perceptions and increase understanding of the root causes and impacts of problem gambling on individuals and communities.

> "What was very interesting in completing this assessment was the economic incentive that encourage individuals to take a change in gaming/gambling. Many viewed it as an opportunity to win in a major way, thus moving them to become financially sound and stable. With that being understood, a major focus for prevention is to increase awareness of the addictive nature or gambling/gaming."
> – Region 4 CSB

Share efforts broadly: There is little being done to address problem gambling and when efforts do exist, they are not well-communicated to community members. Current and planned efforts to address problem gambling should be widely shared with the public using accessible language and provide avenues through which community members can get involved.

Increase local resources for problem gambling and share widely: Resources related to problem gambling are scarce and there is little awareness of those that do exist, though communities indicated a desire for more resources and sharing of those resources. Local and state infrastructures (e.g. services, resources, messaging) for problem gambling prevention and treatment need to be built up and communicated to communities. Special efforts should be made to increase communication of resources in communities with dedicated gambling establishments.

> "An area of prevention focus is to educate and provide community with much-needed information about the signs/symptoms of [problem] gaming/gambling [and] aligning with treatment and clinical workers to help them understand the importance of including questions regarding gaming/gambling in their assessments."
> — Region 4 CSB

Develop resources tailored to local communities: Efforts to address problem gambling should be population-specific, culturally informed, and available in multiple languages to ensure accessibility for those at most risk, including communities of color, low-income communities, older adults, and those whose primary language is not English.

> "The need for resources (posters, phone numbers, websites, etc.) in Spanish and support groups in Spanish (led by Spanish speakers) are needed…male members of the Latinx community are spending 'entire paychecks' at places with slot machines and scratchers and we need to understand the cultural piece of this in relation to gambling."
> — Region 4 CSB

Engage community members and leadership in prevention efforts: A coalition of diverse community members can provide the perspective and expertise necessary to address problem gambling. Communities are poised to engage community members, policy makers, and existing coalitions to increase awareness and community buy-in of problem gambling prevention efforts. Efforts should be made to engage industry professionals and leadership in these efforts and identify avenues to balance the economic benefits of gambling establishments with responsible gambling prevention messaging.

> "The scores indicate next steps should include building capacity within our community to increase efforts related to gaming and gambling awareness, education, and resource accessibility. This should include building a team to work on this issue collaboratively in the community, integrating gaming and gambling into our local coalition, and inviting new stakeholders to get involved."
> — Region 3 CSB

Marijuana

History & Context

Possession and the sale of marijuana is illegal under federal law, but the public consensus on using marijuana has changed over recent decades. Use has become more mainstream and accepted in society. Many states (37) have legalized the use of marijuana for medicinal use, and nineteen states have decriminalized marijuana for recreational use, meaning that possession of cannabis, up to specific amounts, is legal and will not be prosecuted by state and local law enforcement. States that have decriminalized marijuana are regulating and taxing the sale through licensed retailers.

The Commonwealth of Virginia has recently changed their laws regarding cannabis to allow for medical and recreational use, and sales.

2015 — CBD and THC-A oils became legalized for medicinal purposes

2020 — Medical marijuana dispensaries open

2021 — Possession of up to 1 ounce legalized for adults 21 and older

Adults can legally grow up to 4 cannabis plants for personal use

Virginia Cannabis Control Authority was created

2024 — Recreational marijuana sales are slated to begin, if legislators vote to approve

Across Virginia, the term "marijuana" and "cannabis" are used interchangeably, and both will be used throughout this report.

With the ongoing changes in the legalization of cannabis in Virginia, a need was identified to better understand the marijuana landscape, including community readiness to engage in marijuana use prevention activities. The Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services provided funding to Community Service Boards to conduct a needs assessment process to bolster their ability to engage in marijuana prevention activities – including a Community Readiness Assessment to understand community perceptions, knowledge, and readiness to engage in this work.

Community Readiness at a Glance

Average Community Readiness Across All Domains

Level of readiness:

High Low to none

Data not available

Average community readiness score across all domains:
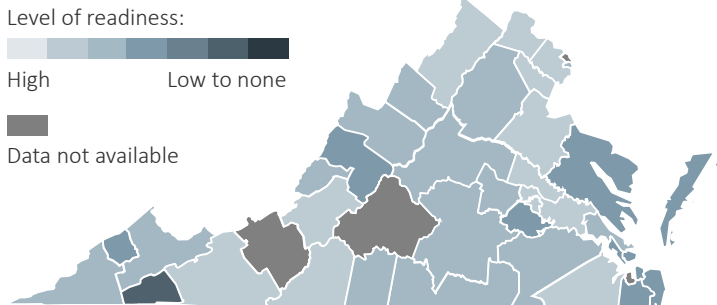
3.3 out of 9
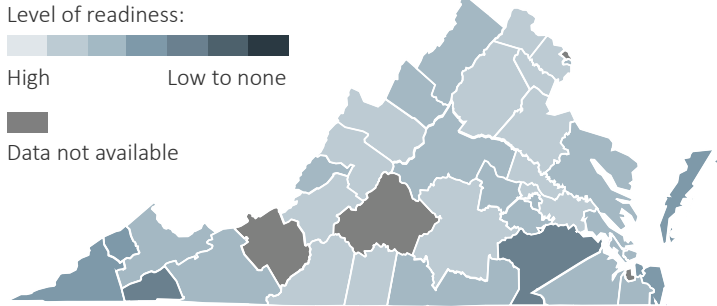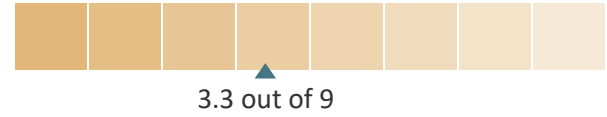
What this says:
Vague Awareness- Most feel that there is a local concern, but there is no immediate motivation to do anything about it.

Retail owners and workers, direct service providers, and other community members were interviewed in the Community Readiness Assessment process. Most CSBs reported that their results felt accurate and were representative of their catchment area. There was an understanding that marijuana use is an issue, or will be an issue soon, but specifics about what to do, when or by whom, was not clear. Some suggested that this could be due to the upcoming legalization of cannabis and the many unknowns surrounding how this will proceed. Some CSBs noted that those who work in the cannabis industry – whether in medical dispensaries or CBD shops – seemed to have a higher awareness than those that do not.

> *"Those who are awaiting the legalization of marijuana appear to be closer to the Preparation stage... The community is concerned with what the legalization will do for their health and wellness and also their bottom-line profits."*
> *— Region 5 CSB*

Community Knowledge of Efforts

Community Readiness Based on Community Knowledge of Efforts

Level of readiness:

High Low to none

Data not available

Average score for this domain:

3.5 out of 9
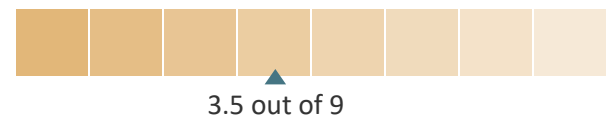
What this says:
Some members of the community know about local efforts.

In general, CSBs reported that their communities have a lack of knowledge on existing efforts promoting responsible marijuana use. Some community members may be aware of local efforts, but the breadth of their knowledge is limited. Similarly, there is little to no awareness of efforts or resources to support those with marijuana use disorder specifically. Many participants did not know the disorder exists.

> *"Participants did not readily acknowledge that marijuana misuse is a legitimate problem. Very few were aware of the availability or recognized a need for any formal treatment programs."*
> *— Region 5 CSB*

Though there is a basic awareness of the partial legalization of marijuana use and growth, many CSBs mentioned inconsistent understanding of the rules and regulations in their communities. This may partly be explained by the changing legal landscape, which was frequently cited. The degree and accuracy of knowledge regarding policies and laws varied even amongst retail stores and entrepreneurs, who appear to be the most educated on the current, changing landscape. Many community members reported that marijuana laws, including sale, use, and growth of the substance, are not being enforced.

> *"Most of the smoke shop retailers were aware of some of the laws… but the accuracy of the knowledge was mixed. The stores were aware that they could not directly sell marijuana but also that there were ways to get around that."*
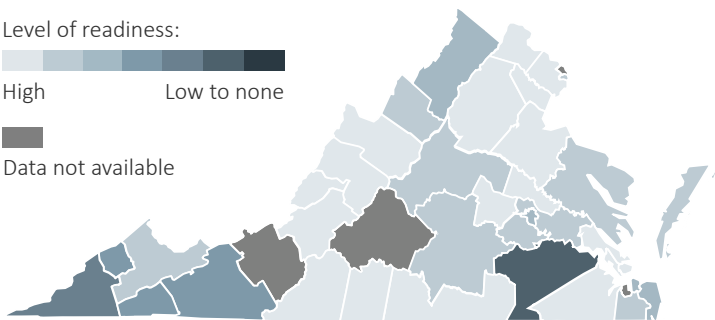> *— Region 5 CSB*

> *"The general consensus was that police were reluctant to enforce the laws while they are still evolving and that the police had more important issues to pursue."*
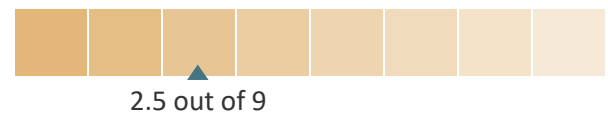> *— Region 5 CSB*

Leadership

Community Readiness Based on Leadership

Level of readiness:

High   Low to none

Data not available

Average score for this domain:

2.5 out of 9

What this says:
Leaders recognize the need to do something regarding marijuana.

While CSBs found that there appears to be a recognition that something needs to be done regarding marijuana use prevention, they reported a lack of active leadership surrounding the sale or use of marijuana in their communities. Many interviewees perceive local leadership as uninvolved, or uninterested, in regulating the use of cannabis at this time.

> *"Lastly, county/regional leadership has not made their opinions or intentions clear to those working in the business so therefore, there is a void in actual guidance at the local level."*
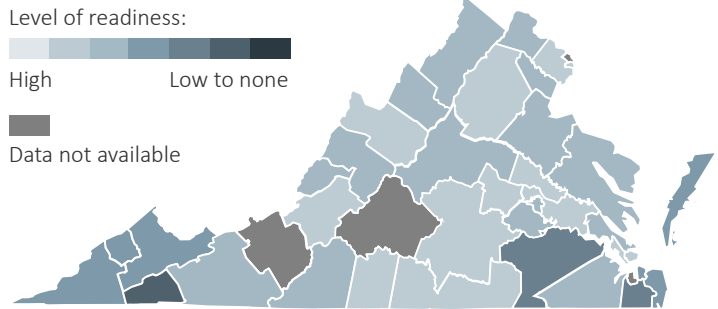> *— Region 5 CSB*

More broadly, participants indicated that addressing marijuana use/sale is not seen as a priority in their areas, citing opioids as a more important matter. Others view marijuana use as an individual responsibility, not a community issue. One exception to this is that some school systems are concerned about the extent to which the issue is impacting youth.

> *"I agree with the finding that our community does not see any of these issues as top concerns at this time. Our community is small and leadership is spread thin, so people feel that suicide and overdoses are a bigger threat and a place to concentrate our energy."*
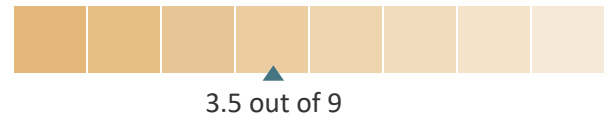> *— Region 4 CSB*

Community Climate

Community Readiness Based on Community Climate

Level of readiness:

High ——————————— Low to none

Data not available

Average score for this domain:

3.5 out of 9

What this says:
The attitude in the community is beginning to reflect interest in marijuana. "We have to do something, but we don't know what to do."

The sale and use of marijuana appears to be widely accepted by most communities across the Commonwealth of Virginia. Rather than identifying marijuana as a potential problem, however, the climate was more focused on moving towards legalization and recreational sale – what to do once cannabis use is fully legalized was mostly undecided.
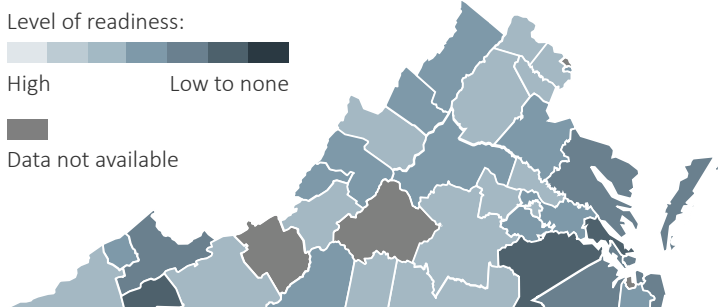
> *"Individuals that want the legalization of marijuana feel those around them support it but are unclear as to how to further pursue it."*
> *— Region 5 CSB*

In the instances where there is interest related to marijuana in communities, there is little to no motivation towards action regarding prevention. Cannabis use appears to have become more normalized and accepted in communities, either medically or recreationally. The widespread use of marijuana appears to often earn comparisons with tobacco cigarettes in terms of use, social norms, and ease of access. Communities do not perceive risks associated with use, generally considering marijuana use as safe, limiting their motivation to engage in prevention activities.

> *"Almost all the participants spoke up about how marijuana is normalized. They shared how there are entire news sources dedicated to the topic, how it is easy to get, how it's looked at like a pack of cigarettes, how it is medically accepted, etc."*
> *— Region 4 CSB*

Community Knowledge About the Issue

Community Readiness Based on Community Knowledge About the Issue

Level of readiness:

High ——————————— Low to none

Data not available

Average score for this domain:

4.5 out of 9
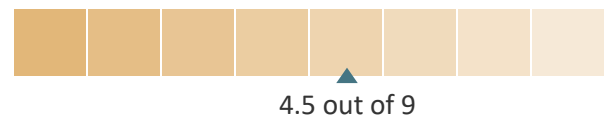
What this says:
Some community members have basic knowledge of marijuana. General information on marijuana is available.

Community knowledge related to marijuana was one of the domains that reflected higher levels of readiness. This reflects the idea that cannab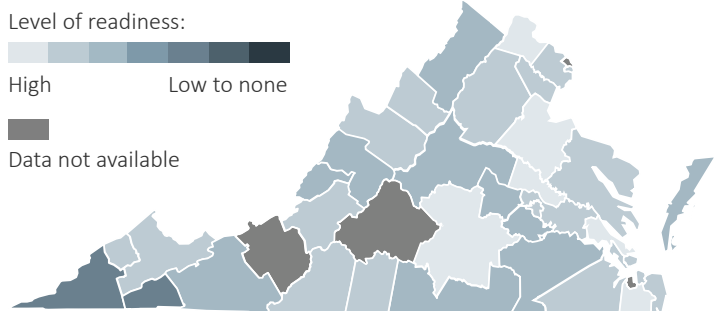is use, and the legalization of use, is becoming more talked about openly in the community. Participants were readily able to speak on marijuana related issues, especially the movements in Virginia towards legalization and community access and availability of marijuana or cannabis products. Marijuana use was seen as very common in communities, especially among youth, many of whom are able to access marijuana easily. A number of community members spoke about medical marijuana access and how to navigate the system and get access to a medical marijuana card to be able to purchase products at medical dispensaries.

Similar to the community climate domain, however, knowledge seemed centered on matters related to legalization and marijuana access rather than any associated risks or harm that may warrant prevention efforts. As communities appear ready to discuss matters related to marijuana, there may be pathways to incorporate prevention related topics into the conversation alongside conversations about legalization.

> *"However, clearly the easiest way to access it, whether on the black market or through the dispensary, seemed to be knowing someone who already had it and having them share their knowledge."*
> *— Region 5 CSB*

Resources Related to the Issue

Community Readiness Based on Resources Related to the Issue

Level of readiness:

High   Low to none

Data not available

Average score for this domain:

2.7 out of 9

What this says:
The community is not sure what it would take, or where their resources would come from, to initiate efforts.

There was an overwhelming sense that community members did not know what resources were available about marijuana use prevention or how to treat marijuana use disorder, nor if the resources were needed. Some had the attitude that marijuana is not physically harmful, at least compared to other substances, so did not need resources.

> *"Only a few respondents said they would like to know if such resources if they existed, but most felt that marijuana use disorder must be extremely rare since marijuana use is never associated with overdoses."*
> *— Region 5 CSB*

Others expressed the idea that marijuana use, and any such issues that result from use, are not the community's concern but rather the concern of individuals. As such, it is not the community's responsibility to take action and provide such resources to those in need.

> *"The larger focus group that was interviewed reminisced about the D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Program) program that was in place at elementary schools between 1983 and 2009. Citing its ineffectiveness, they all felt that a similar program for marijuana use today would only lead to additional use, not any sort of prevention. Most all felt that education around marijuana was needed but that anyone who overindulged was not a concern for the community to address."*
> *— Region 5 CSB*

Next Steps in Preparing for Marijuana Prevention

Increasing awareness related to marijuana needs to be a significant focus as legalization continues to evolve: There was an overwhelming sense of low community awareness expressed by over half of CSBs. People seemed to be confused or were unclear on issues surrounding marijuana. Education regarding changing laws and policies, as well as risks for youth, were specifically called out as important. Media campaigns, especially those on social media, were seen as ways to address low understanding in the community. Some also noted that strengthening partnerships with key stakeholders, increasing community dialogue, and targeting messages at specific groups will be central to their efforts moving forward.

> " *"The general public should be kept aware of any new laws or changes to the current marijuana laws, as a lot of folks are not clear on what they are."*
> *— Region 4 CSB*
>
> *"The first issue is that there is still a lot unknown by everyone exactly what the new Virginia Marijuana Law, passed in 2021 by the General Assembly, will contain. In fact, the General Assembly made some revisions to the law during its 2022 session. It is difficult to give a lot of good information about an everchanging law."*
> *— Region 2 CSB*
>
> *"Participants did not feel as if marijuana use was harmful overall but recognized that there is a great amount of inconsistency that needs to be addressed."*
> *— Region 5 CSB*

Continued examination on the economic effects of cannabis legalization: Several communities reported the need for more research and knowledge on how marijuana legalization will impact their community, or similar communities. This may be especially true for more rural or coastal communities, compared to urban centers.

> " *"The financial impact of legalization is worthy of in-depth study."*
> *— Region 5 CSB*

Develop or expand existing resources and share widely: Marijuana specific resources, such as risks associated with use, and support seeking treatment were mentioned often as needed in the community. However, framing these resources in an approachable manner focused on specific aspects, like youth use, might be needed.

> " *"Respondents were not aware of any programs that existed to treat a marijuana use disorder or if any are even needed. If they mentioned a program at all, it was usually designed to treat a separate disorder or social problem and they thought that a potential marijuana use disorder could be addressed within one of these programs. Most everyone felt that a marijuana use disorder must be extremely rare since marijuana use is never associated with overdoses."*
> *— Region 5 CSB*

Expand prevention efforts for youth: CSBs repeatedly mentioned youth and young adults as an area for needed growth in prevention services. Specifics that were mentioned include increasing education and knowledge related to risks of use, reducing access to marijuana, and shifting perception of marijuana use as an adult activity, like alcohol or tobacco.

> *"Increase our awareness and education campaigns regarding the scientific and public health aspects about the use of marijuana the current impacts on health, especially among youth, when they use marijuana."*
> *— Region 2 CSB*
>
> *"The major takeaway our team found when conducting the Marijuana Needs Assessment was the overwhelming and ease of access for youth to obtain marijuana. Students in our after-school programs and school groups were more likely to respond negatively towards marijuana use than other students. This shows prevention programs and education does work."*
> *— Region 2 CSB*

Acknowledge and address historical racial disparities within the criminal justice system: The observation that Black and people of color have been treated differently for marijuana use, especially by the legal system, was made in several communities. Disproportionate numbers of the BIPOC population have been negatively impacted by strict enforcement of cannabis use laws in the past compared to their White peers.

> *"Some talked about the difference in treatment with marijuana between White and Black people. They talked about White folks having enough money to set up farms, go through the legal process, but Black people go to jail for 3 joints in their car."*
> *— Region 4 CSB*
>
> *"One area of inconsistency was focused on incarceration as a result of marijuana drug charges. No one really wanted to see anyone go to jail over marijuana use and realized that it has become a racial equality/social justice issue. Two individuals mentioned that we needed to reconcile the current laws with the old laws and release or reduce the sentences of those who are doing jail time for marijuana offenses."*
> *— Region 5 CSB*
>
> *"He shared that 75% of all the drug arrests are Black people while Black people make only 15% of the county. He also mentioned how the laws are used to suppress the poor and damage the community."*
> *— Region 4 CSB*

Successes and Challenges

Gaming and Gambling - Successes

> Assessment process increased awareness of the issue for both CSB staff and community members

> Accessed additional support, like contracting with VCU, involvement from their coalition, organized regional efforts, and hiring new staff

> Involved a wide variety of engaged community members that shared openly

> Offered incentives to improve participant recruitment

> Connected potential participants with the contractor via email (warm hand-off)

> *"This assessment brought awareness of the issue to the participants. Most had not given it much thought, but through this process, became aware of the breadth of issues it may raise in the future."*
> *– Region 5 CSB*

> *"The needs assessment process was helpful in getting a better understanding of the types of gambling activities occurring in our communities. The process also shed light on how our community understands what constitutes as gaming and gambling. I think for many of our interviewees, they now see things different than they did before the interview. For example, one interview was helping fund her son's gambling addiction without realizing that that was what she was doing when she gave him money monthly to "help him with bills" and he used some of her money to play lottery on a regular basis."*
> *– Region 4 CSB*

Gaming and Gambling - Challenges

> Meeting the due dates and the lack of coordination between this project timeline with other due dates for CSBs

> Identifying and engaging participants in the process, including industry and leadership voices

> CSB staff capacity to complete the assessment

> The assessment tool itself: length, depth, and wording of interview questions

> Scoring responses, especially how to categorize responses and capture polarized views within a group

> *"It was more challenging than expected to identify key informants and stakeholders for the issue of problem gaming and gambling. Many community leaders and stakeholders who were initially asked indicated they had no awareness of gambling or gaming as an issue and therefore did not feel their input would be beneficial."*
> *– Region 1 CSB*

> *"Getting key informants to participate as it's hard to ask one more thing of community partners as they're actively addressing COVID response and experiencing personal burnout from the past 2+ years of living through collective community traumas of pandemic and social/civic unrest."*
> *– Region 1 CSB*

Marijuana – Successes

> Community members were open, candid, friendly and engaged in the conversations

> People seemed eager to share their perspective on marijuana

> Process was received positively and increased awareness and knowledge of the issue

> Outreach sparked new conversations with a diverse group of stakeholders, including community leaders and youth

> *"This assessment was received very positively. Most everyone was eager to share their experiences with marijuana and they are eager to see it legalized more fully. For the most part, every place visited was friendly and open to questioning and it was easy to see that this is an issue that affects people of all ages, socio-economic statuses, and races."*
> *— Region 5 CSB*

Marijuana – Challenges

> Engaging some community partners to participate

> Resources and effort needed to complete was extensive

> Some responses felt guarded

> Tool was perceived as long, difficult to score and/or using hard to understand terminology

> *"It was difficult to get people to agree to be a part of the process. Some were fearful that their employers would find out that they participated. There seems to be fear of reprimand for giving data and opinions about marijuana and gambling, which makes data collection difficult."*
> *— Region 4 CSB*

Learnings for Future Needs Assessments

> Identify multiple points in time when the assessment will be conducted in initial planning and preparation to establish baseline data and create opportunities to evaluate impact of prevention activities through follow-up assessments.

> Hiring of external contractors aided in saving time and resources and allowed interviewees to be more open. Support CSBs to contract out for the work if they lack internal staff capacity to complete it.

> Utilize 2-person interview teams.

> Include incentives to demonstrate value for interviewee's time and expertise.

> Provide additional trainings that include practice scoring responses. Review the scoring guide for clarity, ease of scoring, and ability to capture polarized responses.

> Give a longer timeline (that doesn't overlap with holidays) and more support planning the implementation of the assessment.

> Facilitate the sharing of learnings within CSBs (from staff to staff) and across CSBs.

> Offer outreach support to CSBs to identify and connect with potential participants.

> Implement strategies that were successful during this assessment.

> *"I feel like we have just scratched the surface regarding community readiness and marijuana. We need to continue listening sessions and focus groups with both youth and adults.....especially as the legal landscape shifts [regarding] marijuana laws in Virginia."*
> *— Region 4 CSB*