Colorado legalized recreational marijuana use in 2012 – and the state’s residents became the first to legally grow and possess marijuana for non-medical use in January 2014. The state legalized medical marijuana use in 2000, and was one of the first to allow commercial sales for medical use in 2009.

Across our nation law enforcement executives are building knowledge and expertise to address the unexpected consequences of marijuana legalization. Three other states – Washington, Oregon, and Alaska – have legalized recreational marijuana, and other state and local jurisdictions have been dealing with the secondary impacts of Colorado’s marijuana legalization law.

The increased potency of marijuana, combined with widespread “edible” versions in baked goods and candy, have increased the risk of people overdosing on edible THC. Emergency rooms have documented a growing number of THC overdoses, with patients experiencing psychotic episodes, excited delirium, or heightened anxiety. Additionally, the packaging and marketing of products are directed to youth with candy, cookies, soda pop, and like products. A marijuana user has over four times the risk of a heart attack for up to an hour after smoking the drug. Driving impairment can last up to 24 hours after ingestion.

Marijuana legalizes breathing under the influence” testing requires new training and policies. Determining the difference between legal amounts and uses of marijuana requires review and more training. Safety training must be increased because of “legal” but unsafe processing operations. Homeless shelters report an increase in out-of-state homeless youth, drawn by legal marijuana, who are creating other crime problems, according to media accounts.

Because the public believes legal marijuana is safe to use, law enforcement leaders face a new challenge in alerting the public to the continued safety and health risks. The message to the public can no longer simply be “marijuana is illegal,” but must emphasize the public safety problems that legal marijuana causes.