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**Contact:** [Sarah Manekin](#), Abell Foundation  
410-547-1300

## **New Report: Maryland Should Relax Standards for Disqualifying Police Candidates Based on Marijuana Use**

*Under current standards, the Baltimore Police Department is losing qualified candidates unnecessarily*

**BALTIMORE** - Maryland's strict police hiring standards that automatically disqualify any applicant who has used marijuana in the past three years create an obstacle to police recruitment and diversity, especially in Baltimore City, a new report funded by the Abell Foundation concludes. As Mayor Catherine Pugh and the Baltimore City Council explore strategies to increase overall recruitment and encourage more officers to live in Baltimore City, they should take a careful look at these standards, which account for 40 percent of all disqualifications and automatically disqualify 8 percent of applicants from Baltimore City

The report, [High Standards? Reassessing the Use of Marijuana Standards to Screen Police Recruits in Maryland](#), reviews marijuana hiring standards for police departments across the U.S. The report finds that only seven states have statewide marijuana standards for police recruits at all; and that, of those, Maryland is the strictest. Meanwhile, the trend among cities and states around the U.S. is toward more lenient standards, and many cities have adopted holistic standards that evaluate marijuana use in the context of an individual's broader life history.

Police recruitment is widely recognized as a major challenge for Baltimore City. From 2001-2016, attrition from the BPD outpaced recruitment. Just over the past five years, the force has decreased by 16 percent, driving up overtime costs. Although the Baltimore Police Department has taken important steps forward, as reflected in an uptick in recruitment numbers in 2017, significant challenges remain. If the police force remains understaffed, it will be difficult for the BPD to implement community-oriented policing strategies, as the city promised to do in its consent decree with the U.S. Department of Justice.

Author Nate Loewentheil recommends that Maryland let individual jurisdictions within the state set their own standards for police applicants and further recommends that the Baltimore Police Department completely eliminate predetermined marijuana standards and evaluate candidates on a case-by-case basis.

Nate Loewentheil is a political organizer, public policy expert and writer. Most recently, he served as a senior policy advisor to former President Barack Obama and led the White House Taskforce for Baltimore City.

The BPD's recruitment efforts have been hindered by a tight regional labor market, slow application process and the increasing pressures faced by police. While the department has worked to address some of these issues, the marijuana standard continues to be a major obstacle. According to data provided by the Baltimore Police Department (BPD), in the first six months of 2017, 7 percent of all applicants and 8 percent of African-American applicants were disqualified because of prior marijuana use. The evidence, however, suggests that marijuana use is not an effective way to screen police applicants, the report finds.

Police departments already have intensive screening processes designed to assess an applicant's ability to perform the work. Problematic behaviors, such as heavy drug use, are evaluated during that screening process. If recent marijuana use is part of a broader pattern of drug use, that should and will still count in the evaluation. But light marijuana use itself does not correlate with job performance or job fitness and may disqualify otherwise strong candidates. In light of this, many cities across the country have dropped automatic disqualifications for marijuana and moved to holistic standards that evaluate a candidate's drug use in context.

A small number of cities and states have balked at reducing marijuana standards because of strong community norms against marijuana use. However, Marylanders have grown increasingly tolerant of marijuana use, with 50 percent supporting legalization and 70 percent supporting decriminalization. The report argues that as public opinion on marijuana use has shifted, so too should the marijuana standard for police applicants.

In summary, the report argues, the current marijuana standards in Maryland are as strict as any in the country, disqualify otherwise qualified candidates, are out of line with community norms, and create unnecessary obstacles to recruitment efforts at the Baltimore Police Department.

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ABELL FOUNDATION | 111 South Calvert Street, Suite 2300 | Baltimore, MD 21202 | [www.abell.org](http://www.abell.org)

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