

Cannabis Use Prevention and Education Awareness Campaigns Annual Evaluation 2024

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Problem Statement

In response to Illinois' legalization of recreational marijuana, Rescue Agency, in collaboration with Prevention First and the Illinois Department of Human Services, Division of Substance Use Prevention and Recovery (IDHS/SUPR), launched the *Let's Talk Cannabis* and *Unfaded* campaigns.

Through various media channels, including social media, television, and community events, *Let's Talk Cannabis* provides evidence-based information to dispel myths and equip individuals with the knowledge to make responsible choices. Meanwhile, *Unfaded* targets high-risk youth (youth who are at least 'interested' in using substances) ages 13 to 18 in Illinois, promoting a drug-free lifestyle through engaging storytelling and community partnerships. By empowering individuals with evidence-based information, these campaigns work to educate audiences so that they can make informed decisions about their use of (or abstinence from) substances.

Evaluation Objectives

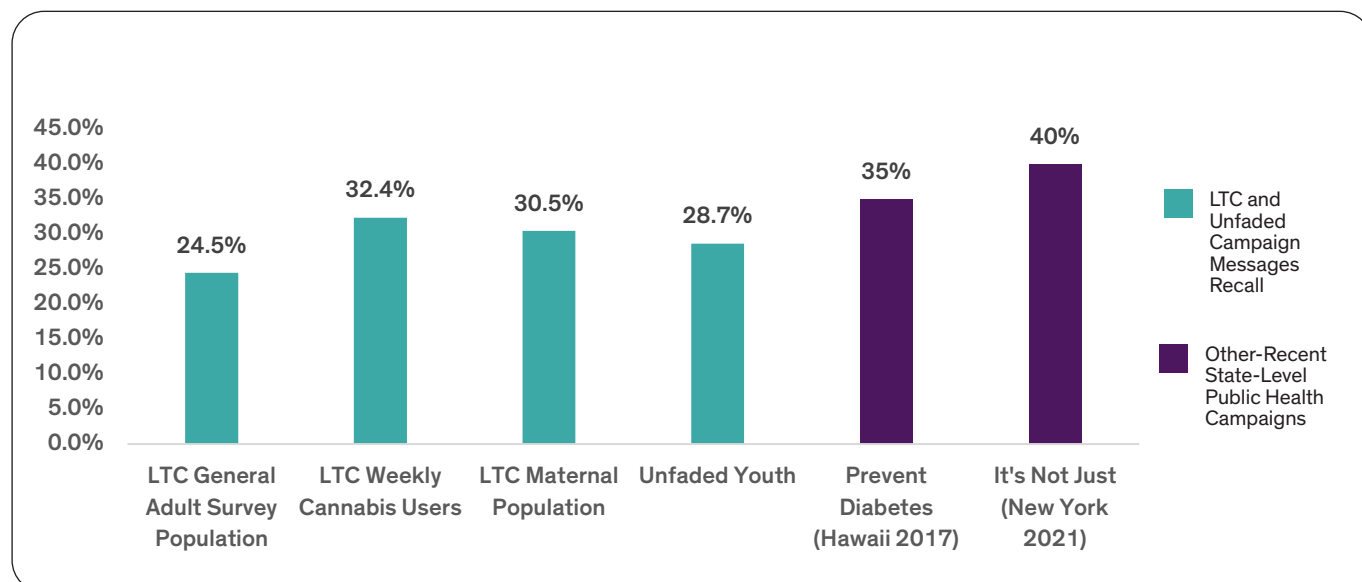
The evaluation aimed to:

1. Assess the target audiences' exposure to and engagement with each campaign.
2. Evaluate the extent to which the campaigns achieved their objectives of raising awareness and educating about cannabis and substance use among priority audiences, including understanding more about the target audiences' knowledge and potential behaviors.
3. Provide recommendations for enhancing future campaign implementation, considering the specific needs and preferences of the target audience.

Main Findings

As depicted in Figure 1, in total, 24.5% of adult survey respondents recalled seeing any *Let's Talk Cannabis* campaign messages. Among at least weekly cannabis users, overall campaign recall was significantly higher at 32.4% ($p < 0.001$); overall recall was also higher among minority respondents, at 29.3% ($p = 0.003$). Overall campaign recall was also significantly

Figure 1: LTC and Unfaded Campaign Messages Recall Compared to Other Recent State-Level Public Health Campaigns



Across LTC and Unfaded, the audiences consistently expressed a desire for novel, evidence-based, cited, and trustworthy information delivered through useful messages to guide their substance use decisions. Future campaigns should prioritize this as their central focus.

higher than general adult survey respondents among respondents in the maternal population (assigned female at birth, ages 16 to 45, at 30.5% ($p < 0.001$)). Additionally, in total, 28.7% of youth respondents recalled having seen any *Unfaded* campaign content in the past year when asked without any aid. The recall numbers for *LTC* and *Unfaded* are low in comparison with other recent state-level public health campaign benchmarks. For example, in 2017, the *Prevent Diabetes* campaign in Hawaii yielded a 35% recall, and in 2021, the *It's Not Just* campaign in New York yielded a 40% recall.

Let's Talk Cannabis (Adult 21+ Moderate Users):

The evaluation revealed strong positive responses to this campaign, indicating high receptivity among the target audience, although the campaign reach among the target audience appears to fall beneath similar state-level health campaign benchmarks. Key elements from the 'THC Advisor' message were particularly effective and should be integrated into future campaigns.

Conversely, adjustments are suggested for the 'Weed Baking Show' messaging to avoid patronizing the audience and to provide information the audience would find useful. Respondents appreciated the non-judgmental tone of the campaign

messaging and emphasized the importance of being treated as capable adults. Moreover, there is a notable gap in dispensary communications, representing a missed opportunity to extend campaign messaging to social media.

Let's Talk Cannabis (New and Expecting Mothers):

The evaluation observed relatively low reach among the target audience when compared to state-level health campaign benchmarks. The evaluation also revealed pushback from the target audience for the existing *Let's Talk Cannabis* (New and Expecting Mothers) campaign messaging. Audiences called for the delivery of accurate, trustworthy, and cited information to build campaign messaging credibility. The messaging should also acknowledge medical needs for which some individuals might consider using cannabis while promoting safer choices during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Addressing the gap in dispensary communications regarding safe cannabis use during pregnancy is essential, emphasizing the need for clear and science-based information on perinatal cannabis use.

Unfaded (High-Risk Teens 13–18):

The evaluation of this campaign also indicated relatively low recall among the target audience compared to other state-level campaign benchmarks. The research suggests that future messaging for the *Unfaded* campaign should introduce novel and trusted statistics from credible sources to enhance its credibility and relevance among its target audience. Developing more informative content is crucial for maintaining audience engagement and addressing potential message fatigue. Treating youth audiences as capable adults who seek information to guide their substance use decision-making is essential. Enhanced outreach strategies are needed to increase campaign engagement, particularly among youth, and tailoring messaging to resonate with diverse demographic groups is important to ensure equitable perceptions and understanding.

Key Insights and Recommendations

- The reach of all three campaigns (*LTC* 21+ Moderate Users, *LTC* New & Expecting Mothers, and *Unfaded*) was slightly below average compared to other state-level public health campaigns.
- Effective message placement helped reach Black/Hispanic target audiences which were prioritized by the health equity approach.
- The *LTC* 21+ Moderate Users campaign was well-received by its target audience, with respondents appreciating its nonjudgmental tone. *LTC* New & Expecting Mothers' target audience faced challenges with the campaign's abstinence messaging, causing confusion among those seeking pain or mental health relief without alternative solutions.
- The *Unfaded* campaign's target audience showed signs of message fatigue due to repetitive content that is already familiar from other campaigns (e.g., *Truth*, *The Real Cost*).

Figure 2: LTC Safe Storage Practices

