



Natalie Lyla Ginsberg

MAPS Policy and Advocacy: Year in Review

NATALIE LYLA GINSBERG

MAPS has experienced an encouraging and exciting year in the political sphere! Though MAPS has conducted research with MDMA for over a decade, our cannabis study has continued to be blocked by numerous hurdles for nearly as long. MAPS has been challenging these research obstructions for over a dozen years, and for the first time this year, these impediments are finally crumbling, and our cannabis study is almost ready to begin! I've been amazed even over the course of this past year how much has changed: the same congressional offices who were completely dismissive of the medical value of cannabis this fall arranged a Senate hearing by spring to better understand the barriers to cannabis research.

A look back at this past year:

June 2014: Congressman Blumenauer works with MAPS to write a letter to Sylvia Burwell, Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), requesting that the Public Health Service (PHS) Review, an impediment unique to cannabis research, be eliminated. 29 Congressmen sign the letter.

August 2014: *The New York Times* publishes "Medical Marijuana Research Hits Wall of U.S. Law," featuring interviews and pictures of Dr. Rick Doblin, MAPS Founder and Executive Director, and Dr. Sue Sisley, MAPS Co-Investigator for the cannabis study.

Fall 2014: MAPS works with Senator Warren's office to create a similar letter in the Senate.

December 2014: MAPS wins historic \$2.15 million research grant from Colorado State to research cannabis' efficacy as PTSD treatment. However, federal restrictions still apply to MAPS research. Despite cannabis' legality in Colorado, the only

cannabis legal in the eyes of the federal government is grown by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) at the University of Mississippi, which continues to struggle to provide adequate amounts or strains of cannabis.

March 2015: Dr. Rick Doblin and Dr. Sue Sisley are invited to speak in Tel Aviv by Israeli's leading progressive party, also known as the "pro-peace" party, Meretz, as they announce their support for medical cannabis.



Sue Sisley, M.D., speaks in Tel Aviv

March 2015: Senators Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Rand Paul (R-KY) and Cory Booker (D-NJ) introduce the first Senate bill ending federal prohibition of medical cannabis. The CARERS Act (Compassionate Access, Research Expansion, and Respect States) comprehensively addresses the two unique barriers to cannabis research: the NIDA monopoly on federally legal research marijuana, and the PHS review process for access to NIDA cannabis. MAPS advocated for research to play a primary

role in the bill, and advised on the content. The bill immediately received strong bipartisan support, even gaining a fourth sponsor, Dean Heller (R-NV), just days after its introduction.

April 2015: On 4/21, CNN aired Dr. Sanjay Gupta's third installment of WEEDS. This episode focused on the politics obscuring cannabis research, and featured Dr. Rick Doblin and Dr. Sue Sisley prominently. President Obama even made a cameo!

April 2015: I met with medical cannabis activists in Cape Town to discuss their planned constitutional challenge, and discuss the state of psychedelic and cannabis research in South Africa. South Africa is one of the world's biggest producers and consumers of cannabis, but has some of the most draconian cannabis policies, with no exceptions for medical use.

May 2015: MAPS is invited to present at the American Psychiatric Association (APA) conference in Toronto, the biggest gathering of Psychiatrists each year. Not only were Dr. Mithoefer and Dr. Grob's presentations incredibly well received, but during our countless interactions with attendees at the MAPS booth, we discovered that psychiatrists were generally incredibly supportive of our research and were shocked to discover the degree to which cannabis research has been blocked.

June 2015: HHS announces "the elimination of the Public Health Service (PHS) review of non-federally funded research protocols involving marijuana and the utilization of the existing Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Investigational New Drug (IND) process for drug development!" And after over a decade of MAPS' relentless commitment to raise awareness around barriers to cannabis research, the Obama administration finally cedes to growing pressure and logic and eliminates one of the two major hurdles. Success!

June 2015: Shortly after the Obama administration's exciting announcement, two historically anti-medical cannabis Senators, Senator Chuck Grassley (R-IA) and Diane Feinstein (D-CA), held a Senate Hearing: "Cannabidiol: Barriers to Research and Potential Medical Benefits." Dr. Rick Doblin submitted testimony for the hearing, and both Nora Volkow, NIDA's Director for over a decade, as well as Kevin Sabet, the notorious anti-cannabis campaigner, testified in support of eliminating NIDA's cannabis monopoly.

★

Reviewing the exciting progress we've made this past year amplifies my excitement for the new projects we are moving forward with this year. We are currently working with Professor Lyle Craker to prepare his second application to grow federally

approved research cannabis, and therein break the NIDA monopoly. When the DEA failed to respond to Professor Craker's 2001 application, MAPS and Professor Craker filed a lawsuit. Though the judge ruled in our favor, The DEA was able to simply reject the ruling! We're hopeful that with all of the recent cannabis progress and increased public support, logic and compassion will prevail.

MAPS has also been working to promote harm reduction policies at concerts and festivals. Specifically, We have partnered with Drug Policy Alliance and Dede Goldsmith to raise awareness and increase political pressure to Amend the Rave Act. Dede

launched the Amend the Rave Act Campaign in honor of her daughter Shelley, who passed away due to hypothermia complications after taking MDMA at an unsafe venue. This year we will be working on finding congressional sponsors for an Amend the Rave

"We have not emphasized sufficiently the cultural revolution that we have to make among ourselves in order to force the governments to do differently. Things do not start with the governments."

—Grace Lee Boggs

Act bill, and targeting the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) to clarify that venues will not be prosecuted for implementing harm reduction measures to improve the safety of their guests.

MAPS has also joined the UN Civil Society Task Force (CSTF) for the upcoming United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on the World Drug Problem in April. The CSTF will serve as the official liaison between the UN and the world community in preparation for UNGASS 2016. MAPS's stated priorities regarding the UN are: 1) Promoting policies with the goal of harm reduction rather than criminalization, including psychedelic harm reduction; 2) Ending worldwide research obstruction of cannabis, psychedelics and all substances, and promoting drug policies grounded in science; 3) Decriminalization of personal drug use, and improved access to therapeutic use of cannabis and psychedelic substances.

As Grace Lee Boggs, the inspiring activist who passed away on October 5th, argues: "We have not emphasized sufficiently the cultural revolution that we have to make among ourselves in order to force the governments to do differently. Things do not start with the governments." All of the political and cultural progress we have made, and will continue to make, is anchored entirely in our community. So thank you, and here's to a year of healing more policies and people! 🌱

Natalie Lyla Ginsberg is Policy and Advocacy Manager at MAPS. She earned her Master's in Social Work from Columbia University in 2014, and her Bachelor's in History from Yale University in 2011. At Columbia, Natalie served as a Policy Fellow at the Drug Policy Alliance. Through her work at MAPS, Natalie advocates for unbiased research to help undermine both the war on drugs and the current mental health paradigm. She can be reached at natalie@maps.org.