

Analysis: Companies need workers – but people keep getting high

“Some weeks this year, 90 percent of applicants would test positive for something,” ruling them out for the job, said Laura Stephens, a human resources manager for the company in Denver.

The state’s unemployment rate is already low — 3 percent, compared to [4.7 percent](#) for the entire nation. Failed drug tests, which are rising locally and nationally, further drain the pool of eligible job candidates.

“Finding people to fill jobs,” Stephens said, “is really challenging.”

Job applicants are testing positive for marijuana, cocaine, amphetamine and heroin at the highest rate in 12 years, according to a new report from Quest Diagnostics, a clinical lab that follows national employment trends. An analysis of about 10 million workplace drug screens from across the country in 2016 found positive results from urine samples increased from 4 percent in 2015 to 4.2 percent in 2016.

The most significant increase was in positive tests for marijuana, said Barry Sample, the scientist who wrote the report. Positive tests for the drug reached 2 percent last year, compared with 1.6 percent in 2012.

Although state laws have [relaxed](#) over the past four years, employers haven’t eased up on testing for pot, even where it’s legal.

California, Maine, Massachusetts and Nevada moved last year to legalize recreational marijuana, joining Alaska, Colorado, Oregon and Washington. Twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia, meanwhile, [permit](#) medical marijuana.

Under federal law, however, weed remains illegal — and employers in the United States can refuse to hire anyone who uses it, even if they have a prescription, according to [the Society for Human Resource Management](#).

In the oral fluid testing category, which picks up on recent drug use, and is typically used to test workers on the job, positive drug tests for marijuana surged about 75 percent in the United States over the past four years — from 5.1 percent in 2013 to 8.9 percent in 2016, according to Quest. The data show smaller increases in urine and hair testing (a 4.2 percent increase over the past year).

© Justin Tang/The Canadian Press via AP Legal marijuana is spreading across the country -- but employers aren't changing their ways.

Colorado and Washington, which became the first two states to legalize weed in 2012, showed the largest growth in positive tests. Urine screens that detected pot rose 11 percent in Colorado and 9 percent in Washington, the first time either state outpaced the national average since residents could lawfully light up a joint.

Quest noted that employers are also increasingly encountering job applicants who take other illicit substances. Tests that turned up cocaine increased 12 percent in 2016, hitting a seven-year high of 0.28 percent, up from 0.25 percent in 2015. Positive test results for amphetamine jumped 8 percent.

The culture change in pro-marijuana states hasn't broadly altered the way employers screen applicants, said Sample, the scientist. "Ninety-nine percent of drug panels we perform in Colorado and Washington," he said, "still test for marijuana."

Companies such as McLane, where employees operate heavy machinery, keep testing for marijuana out of concern for everyone's safety, said Stephens, the human resources manager. The firm conducts follicle tests, which can catch traces of weed for up to three months after someone smokes.

She said the company saw "a big spike" in failed tests after pot became legal.

Meanwhile, Colorado's legal marijuana business is booming. By 2016, Colorado had 440 marijuana retail stores and 531 medical dispensaries, [one report showed last year](#) — double the number of McDonald's and Starbucks stores in the state.

Curtis Graves, the information resource manager at the [Mountain States Employers Council](#), a business group in Colorado, said a small number of his members have dropped THC testing from drug screens, but others don't have that option,

Truck and school bus drivers, for example, are required by law to prove they don't have marijuana in their system before taking a job. Same goes for pilots, subway engineers and security guards. The Department of Transportation [does not recognize](#) medical marijuana as a "valid medical explanation" for failing a drug test.

"Some employers are extremely worried about filling jobs," Graves said. "Work that is considered 'safety sensitive' typically requires that test, and that's not changing."