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Illinois House committee OKs use of medical marijuana

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March 4, 2009 - 2:33 PM

By LAURA GRIFFITH
The Telegraph

SPRINGFIELD - For the first time, a medical marijuana bill has passed the Illinois House Human Services Committee but will have to wait for state budget issues to be ironed out before it gets a chance in the state Senate.

State Sen. William Haine, D-Alton, who is sponsoring a companion bill in the Senate, said the president of the Senate issued a rule Wednesday that would put all bills including a fiscal note on hold for the time being. Before the announcement, the Senate Public Health Committee was expected to hear Senate Bill 1381 next Tuesday.

"It's a good decision," Haine said. "We have to get the budget in order. The (budget) problem, as everyone knows, is catastrophic."

Haine said Gov. Pat Quinn is expected to meet with the General Assembly on March 18 regarding the state's finances.

Although SB 1381's financial impact is not a large amount of money comparatively - only a few hundred thousand dollars, according to Haine - it does involve the Illinois Department of Public Health issuing ID cards and monitoring the use of medical marijuana in the state.

HB 2514 was passed on a 4-3 vote by the House committee in a first-ever occurrence and now will go to the House floor, which could trigger arguments over the state's drug policy.

If passed into law, it would make medical marijuana legal for those with a debilitating medical condition. The state Department of Public Health would issue those people and their primary caregivers registry identification cards that would permit them to legally possess no more than seven dried cannabis plants and two ounces of dried, usable cannabis - with a doctor's recommendation.

The bill's recent progress gives hope to medical marijuana supporters, including Bruce Mirken, director of communications with the Marijuana Policy Project. The MPP is the largest marijuana policy reform organization in the United States.

"The legislative process is always a little bit unpredictable," Mirken

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said. "But we're cautiously optimistic. It does feel like there is momentum building. The fact that medical marijuana passed so overwhelmingly in nearby Michigan (by 63 percent of voters) was a very good omen."

According to a news release from MPP, a 2008 statewide poll shows 68 percent voter support for medical marijuana in Illinois.

"It's a definite sign of progress," Mirken said.

Similar legislation has been introduced for several years but always has been shot down, he said.

"This is a milestone we haven't passed before," he said.

The MPP sponsors initiatives across the country to make medical marijuana legal, including in Vermont, Michigan and Rhode Island, produces lobbyists who work for the cause and works closely with supporting legislators.

"Marijuana is a medicinal plant whose use is recorded in medical literature going back 5,000 years," Mirken said. "It's only a relatively new wrinkle that it hasn't been allowed. It's useful for neuropathic pain, damage to the nerves, that does not respond well to conventional drugs. (It is also helpful in controlling) nausea, vomiting and appetite loss."

Mirken personally got involved in the effort because of friends suffering from AIDS.

"They can't keep down the pills that keep them alive without medical marijuana," he said. "This is where science and compassion and common sense all come together."

State Rep. Patricia Bellock, R-Westmont, said the legislation doesn't include enough safeguards to keep pot out of the hands of people who don't need it for medical reasons, but Mirken disagrees.

Medical marijuana is now legal in 13 states. Of those, Mirken said 11 have had the laws in effect long enough to gather data that shows marijuana use by teens actually has decreased since its legalization. Additionally, a theory that law enforcement would become more difficult has been debunked in states with well-written laws, he said.

Haine said the House bill has been amended to include strict regulation and to meet concerns of law enforcement.

"There are valid concerns," Haine said. "(The bill's passage in the House committee) is a good sign that people have been thinking about this as a remedy for people who are suffering and not viewing it as a stealth legalization. I believe it's a reasonable exercise in government authority. If we're going to tell young people that it can be unhealthy and destructive, for those who are dying or suffering chronic pain, it may be a good thing. Blindly being against any remedy for those people who are suffering, just because we don't like the idea of marijuana being smoked - I don't think that's reasonable."

Dr. Jay Riseman, a Springfield physician, testified before the House committee Wednesday.

"Doctors need safe, effective medicine available to them when treating patients with serious conditions such as cancer, HIV/AIDS and multiple sclerosis," he said. "I've seen medical marijuana work for patients when nothing else did, and I should be able to recommend it to my patients without leaving them vulnerable to arrest and even jail."

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's Web site, www.dea.gov, says that "medical" marijuana already exists in the form of a drug called Marinol, which contains synthetic THC (the active ingredient in marijuana) and can help patients with nausea and loss of appetite, much as marijuana does.

According to the DEA, Marinol is much safer for patients than smoking marijuana, which contains 400 chemicals and carcinogens that can cause entirely new health problems. Marijuana cigarettes also contain four times the

amount of tar as regular cigarettes, the site says.

There are arguments as to whether marijuana is addictive or whether it is a gateway drug that leads users to get into harder drugs. Those debates have gone on for years.

Haine, who served as Madison County state's attorney for 14 years, has sponsored and carried bills that have strengthened law enforcement against methamphetamine use through the legislative process, which he said gives him credibility to present this bill to the Senate.

If the Senate committee passes the bill, Mirken said he hopes it will be called to a floor vote in both chambers.

There is no indication yet when the Senate committee hearing will take place.

The Associated Press contributed some information for this article.

laura_griffith@thetelegraph.com

MORE ONLINE:

Marijuana Policy Project - <http://marijuanapolicy.org>

ProCon.org - <http://medicalmarijuana.procon.org/>

Info on Marinol - <http://www.usdoj.gov/dea/ongoing/marinol.html>

Frequently asked questions - <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/drugfact/faqs.html#2>

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frankrizzo wrote:

"We should be like Canada and legalize Marijuana for everyone." - knightmetal

I agree, everyone should be responsible for their own choice of lifestyle

"Thier healthcare is one of the best ever!" - Wrong. I have relatives there. It is Russian style healthcare. It's great until you need it. Do some research before you post the ridiculous.

3/8/2009 10:35:22 PM

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idog1063 wrote:

It's no wonder Obama and the Democrats can get elected when "crack" is America's hero and "marijuana" is its "heroin".

3/8/2009 9:05:15 AM

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knightmetal wrote:

The war on drugs has lost, we can all see that with all of the available drugs that are readily available to those who want it. Just take a look at the police blotter, lots of them with drugs, and MANY MANY more that never get caught. It happens!

We should be like Canada and legalize Marijuana for everyone. It is legal there! Thier healthcare is one of the best ever! Drug prices are so low and seeing a doc is free from what I have seen and read.

Maybe we can learn from them. Marijuana itself has NEVER resulted in one single overdoes ever! One of the safest drugs there is!! Medical and non-medical!

3/7/2009 6:01:48 AM

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bigredtruck wrote:

this is LONG over due.

3/6/2009 3:17:11 PM

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frankrizzo wrote:

All drugs should be legalized. The money wasted trying to combat use is staggering.

Employers can still drug test and deny jobs to those who are non-compliant. Healthcare providers can jack up their rates or deny coverage as well. Test the welfare recipients till they are blue in the face and stop sending them checks.

Allow people to make their own decisions, but force them to accept the consequences of those decisions.

3/6/2009 11:40:33 AM

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bigbrain wrote:

Pot smoking is OK medicinally. Now the Brain has spoke so dont be talking back. There have been many trials preformed by many Alton residence and look at how healthy they are.

3/6/2009 11:09:52 AM

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