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September 22, 2005 - 6:01AM

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Legalized pot initiative backers light up debate

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Medical marijuana has not gone away in Arizona. Despite its last defeat at the polls nearly three years ago, the medical marijuana issue has returned.

And this time, the scope is bigger.

The Marijuana Policy Project, which calls itself the nation's largest marijuana policy reform organization, is pushing to legalize marijuana use for all adults in Arizona and six other states.

The goal is to put pot in the same category as alcohol, with the same kind of taxes and regulation.

"It's about providing funding and providing organization," said Krissy Oechslin, a spokeswoman for the nonprofit Marijuana Policy Project, based in Washington, D.C. "We'd like to bring it off the street and regulate it."

The effort, however, is in its infancy, and project officials emphasize they have no master plan for the seven states they have targeted: Arizona, Delaware, Idaho, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire and Oregon.

Instead, the group is looking for local activists to build grass-roots support for legalized marijuana. Their efforts would be funded by the project's grant program.

A request for proposals has been issued in the seven states, where grant applicants are asked to list "escalating tactics that would lead to a change in state law in three to five years via the state Legislature or the statewide ballot initiative process," according to a job listing on the Internet.

Those tactics could include organizing demonstrations, lobbying state lawmakers, building a coalition of supportive organizations and generating favorable news coverage.

The effort would go much further than previous Arizona medical marijuana initiatives, but it's not surprising, said Barnett Lotstein, a special assistant in the Maricopa County Attorney's Office.

"The objective was, once you get people to think of drugs as medicine, the next step is legalization," he said. "The ultimate goal of people who propose the legalization of marijuana is the legalization of all drugs."

Project officials, however, said their focus is only on marijuana. And while the organization supports the legal use of marijuana for medicinal purposes, the group is separate from the one that organized Arizona's medical marijuana initiatives, said Bruce Mirken, a spokesman for the project.

Both groups, however, share some of the same financial sources. University of Phoenix founder John Sperling provided financial support for medical marijuana campaigns in Arizona, and gave money to the Marijuana Policy Project once in 2002, said Oechslin. Peter Lewis, chairman of the Progressive Insurance Companies, has contributed money to medical marijuana efforts in Arizona, and is funding the grants program at the Marijuana Policy Project.

"There is probably a range of views out there . . . but we've been pretty clear that we support taxing and regulating marijuana for adults," Mirken said.

The project has targeted Arizona because of support residents have shown for medical marijuana, said Oechslin. In 1996, 65 percent of voters approved a ballot initiative that gave doctors authority to prescribe marijuana to seriously ill patients.

Public support continued two years later, when voters defeated a referendum sent to the ballot by state lawmakers, who wanted the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to approve marijuana before Arizona doctors could prescribe the drug.

But in 2002, voters rejected a ballot measure aimed at correcting problems in the 1996 initiative. Doctors were afraid to write prescriptions for marijuana because federal authorities threatened to take away their prescribing authority, said Dr. Jeffrey Singer, a Phoenix surgeon and a medical marijuana campaign activist.

Proposition 203 would have allowed doctors to write a recommendation rather than a prescription, made possession of small amounts of pot punishable by a fine and created a distribution system using the state health department and the Arizona Department of Public Safety.

The measure was hurt by controversy over having law enforcement distribute pot to sick people, said Singer. Since then, the group behind the medical marijuana propositions has faded from view.

"At the moment, we're sort of on hold," said Singer. "We're waiting for the right time."

The Marijuana Policy Project said the right time is now. The organization is behind efforts in Nevada, where a proposition will be on the November 2006 ballot that would tax and regulate marijuana, and make possession of up to one ounce of the drug legal by state law.

By federal law, marijuana use remains illegal, which could impact any success states have legalizing use of the drug, authorities say. In June, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the federal government could prosecute people with marijuana, even if they have a doctor's recommendation and are caught in a state that allows such possession.

Success on the state level will depend on the strength of grass-roots efforts and the effectiveness of grant applicants from Arizona and elsewhere, Oechslin said.

"It's sort of an open-ended offer," she said.

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