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Illinois

Marijuana Supporters Rally in Downtown Chicago to Push Medical Marijuana Okay in Illinois

Town Travis
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Medill Reports

Crusaders for the medical use of cannabis are stepping up their campaign in Illinois this month as state legislators get ready to vote on a bill that would legalize treatment.

Supporters of the legalization of cannabis gathered at Federal Plaza for a rally on Saturday. The National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws hosted the event, which took place simultaneously in cities around the world in crusades for legalization elsewhere.

"Medical cannabis is an extremely important issue and an issue of compassion," said Dan Linn, executive director for the Illinois chapter of NORML. "There's no reason why the federal government should [deny] patients the right to use that medicine if their doctors recommend it."

If Illinois legalizes medical cannabis, patients and doctors won't have to fear local-level prosecution. Federal officers could still make arrests under U.S. laws, however.

Representatives from Illinois NORML had drug information available and provided "know your rights" training to help cannabis users avoid illegal police searches.

The event focused on legalization of cannabis for medical purposes, including the medical cannabis bill currently before the Illinois Senate (SB2865). A petition was available for people to sign in support of the bill.

Linn prompted the group that gathered to shout "2865! Help keep patients alive!" as they marched around downtown Chicago.

The bill gained more support May 1 when Sen. Michael Noland (D-Elgin) joined as a co-sponsor. Previously the bill was co-sponsored by Sens. John Cullerton and Donn Trotter, both Chicago Democrats. The bill passed through the public health committee and is expected to go to a vote soon.

"Obviously getting [senators] to vote 'yes' on this bill is most important," Linn said, "but if they can co-sponsor it and show their support for this bill, that would be helpful too."

Although most of the people who came to Saturday's event were young, others had long, and sometimes painful, histories that led them to support cannabis use.

"I have friends who have cancer," said Rob Robinson, a 53-year-old cancer survivor who said he used cannabis to treat his Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. "They're in terrible condition, and I can't go to them legally and say, 'Here, try this to see if this helps alleviate your illness and pain.'"

"It's ridiculous that we have laws that prohibit people from ingesting a simple plant" to aid them in treating their disease, Robinson said.

Robinson, who recently walked a 26-mile marathon to support the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, said cannabis use made his chemotherapy much easier. "Just because somebody told you had cancer doesn't mean your days of glory are over," he said.

Medical cannabis use wasn't the only reason people came to the rally. Several people waved signs about the industrial uses for hemp.

"Hemp has 10s of thousands of purposes," said Mike Kales, a young supporter who heads a social group called Unity for Change. "It's a fiber that's stronger and softer than cotton."

Throughout the afternoon the event averaged a crowd of approximately 30-40 people. They came sporting cannabis leaf-shaped pins and buttons, wearing backpacks made of hemp and carrying signs advocating the use and legalization of cannabis.

Linn said the rally was a protest against the criminalization of cannabis but his group lived up to the promise of a peaceful event.

"You've got to be sensible and civic. You don't get the point across being handcuffed and thrown in a police van yelling 'Down with the system,'" Robinson said.

The organizers of the event tried to suggest positive ways to change the system. Richey Gupta, one of the organizers, told the crowd to contact their senator about the Illinois bill. "They're going to vote on it this month in the Senate," he said. His focus then turned to federal issues.

"There's a presidential race going on right now," Gupta said. "We need to support the right candidate."

"Ron Paul!" a young man replied, garnering enthusiastic laughter from the rest of the group.

"Ron Paul can still win," Gupta said, but he advised cannabis supporters to look to Democratic candidate Barack Obama. Obama has said he would support medical cannabis if doctors and other experts advise its use.

"We have the chance to make a change," Gupta said. "More than the march, more than the hemp fest, we need to get political."