

Clergy Back Medical Marijuana in Illinois

P.J. Huffstutter
April 18, 2007
Los Angeles Times

CHICAGO — Arguing that Illinois lawmakers have a moral duty to legalize medical use of marijuana, dozens of pastors and church leaders are urging them to allow doctors to recommend the drug for seriously ill patients.

The religious leaders say they feel compelled to support doctors who want to use whatever tools necessary to ease the pain of the extremely sick.

A petition was e-mailed to state senators last month. The bill, SB 650, is expected to come to a vote Thursday, said Sen. John J. Cullerton, the bill's author. If passed and signed into law, Illinois would become the 13th state to allow the use of medical marijuana.

"This is about compassion for people," Cullerton said. "Many patients are not having trouble finding it. They just don't want to be criminals for using it."

Countered Calvina L. Fay, executive director of the Drug Free America Foundation, a national drug policy group critical of such measures: "People can't just call anything medicine. Just because they're religious leaders does not mean they can judge the merits of something like this."

The letter, which asked that neither medical practitioners face criminal sanctions for recommending the drug nor patients for using it if doctors have told them it could help, reflects the recent trend among religious leaders toward taking a firmer stand on policy issues with which they normally aren't identified. The signers included representatives of Protestant, Jewish, Unitarian and other faiths.

Evangelical conservative groups recently have thrown their support behind environmental measures to curtail global warming, citing their belief that people have a moral responsibility to care for the planet.

In recent years, a growing number of religious denominations have spoken in favor of marijuana's medicinal value. Though most faith-based groups oppose recreational use of the drug, some have started to ask state and federal government agencies to intervene on behalf of patients who struggle with glaucoma, cancer or AIDS.

"I've been a pastor for more than 30 years, and I know some of my parishioners, and their doctors have thought that they need this tool for better pain management," said the Rev.

Bob A. Hillenbrand, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Rockford. He, along with 49 other religious figures in Illinois, signed the petition that had been pulled together by the Interfaith Drug Policy Initiative, a Washington, D.C.-area group that lobbies religious leaders on drug policy issues.

"For me, the question is: Should it be the government deciding out of hand that something is medically wrong to use? Or should it be decided by research and the medical industry itself?" Hillenbrand said.

Illinois already has a law, dating to 1978, that allows doctors to dispense the drug for cancer and glaucoma patients and other procedures "certified to be medically necessary." The bill was signed into law by then-Gov. James R. Thompson. But heated political debate over the issue at the time, as well as some restrictions that were tied to it, essentially nullified the law, Cullerton said.

The current national fight over legalizing medical uses of the drug can be traced to 1996, when a California referendum opened the door to medical marijuana use. In its wake, a number of other states — Alaska, Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Washington — have enacted similar laws that allow certain patients to use the drug, regardless of federal restrictions.

Last year, however, the Supreme Court ruled that federal laws that ban marijuana sales took precedence over state measures that allowed such sales. The decision gave the Drug Enforcement Administration the power to arrest patients and operators at drug distribution centers that had opened after California's Proposition 215 was passed.

The ruling hasn't curtailed state lawmakers from moving forward with pro-medical marijuana initiatives. This month, New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson signed into law a measure that would allow the use of the drug in the treatment of certain medical ailments.

A similar measure is making its way through the Minnesota Legislature.