

Illinois senator working to legalize medical marijuana

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SPRINGFIELD -- State Sen. John Cullerton is making another run at legislation that would make it easier for the seriously ill to legally use marijuana for medicinal purposes.

"This is about the patients. It's not about somebody abusing this law to illegally obtain marijuana," said Sen. Cullerton, D-Chicago.

Wednesday, a Senate committee approved a measure that would allow people to obtain a state-issued medical marijuana identification card so they could legally possess and use marijuana.

Julie Falco, of Chicago, has suffered from debilitating multiple sclerosis for more than 20 years. To ease the pain, she eats 1-inch marijuana brownie cubes three times a day.

Ms. Falco told lawmakers that she has tried many pharmaceutical drugs for her disease, but marijuana is the only thing that seems to help her symptoms without causing negative side effects. Still, there is always the worry that she will get in trouble, she said.

Sen. Cullerton said the purpose of his bill is to decriminalize the use of marijuana by those who really need it for legitimate medical reasons. A similar bill has been introduced by a Republican lawmaker in the Illinois House.

Under Sen. Cullerton's bill, a medical marijuana program would be administered by the Illinois Department of Public Health. Qualifying patients would receive an ID card after providing written certification from their doctors.

The program would only be open to those with specified illnesses including cancer, glaucoma, HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C. Patients could possess up to 8 marijuana plants or designate an approved "caregiver" to grow it for them.

Twelve other states have passed similar laws and Bruce Mirken, spokesman for the Marijuana Policy Project, said the laws work.

"They are not significantly abused and they help terribly suffering people who can't really get relief except through the use of medical marijuana or medical cannabis," he said.

Opponents like Judy Kreamer, president of the anti-drug group Educating Voices, said problems with people trying to skirt the law have cropped up in California, one of the first states to pass a medical marijuana law.

Sen. Cullerton said his bill isn't as broadly written as California's and should not cause the same concerns.

But Laimutis Nargelenas, deputy director of the Illinois Associations of Chiefs of Police, said law enforcement groups have serious concerns.

"This law, from my standpoint, is nothing more than a ruse to try to legalize marijuana in the state of Illinois," he said. "If they want to do that then I think they need to step forward and not hide behind sick people. Let the people of the state of Illinois have a debate and discussion over whether marijuana is legal or illegal in Illinois."

Illinois technically has had a medical marijuana law on the books since the late 1970s, but the state never followed up with the agency administrative rules necessary to allow that law to be used.

Lawmakers have debated Sen. Cullerton's proposal before, and while in years past he has been able to get it out of committee, he's been short of having the votes needed for Senate approval.

"We expect this is the type of bill which is a long battle, he said. "There's been a number of issues that didn't pass the first time, and we keep coming back until people figure out and believe what we're saying."