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Politics

Mass. voters OK marijuana for some medical conditions

By **Chelsea Conaboy and Zachary T. Sampson** | GLOBE STAFF AND GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 07, 2012

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People with debilitating medical conditions and permission from their doctors will be able to buy marijuana from state-sanctioned distribution centers starting next year.

Voters, by a wide margin, approved a ballot question that makes Massachusetts the 18th state to legalize medical marijuana, in addition to the District of Columbia.

While opponents of the law warned that such a law could increase recreational use of marijuana, especially among teens, supporters lauded the vote as a win for patients who have been waiting for legal access to a drug thought to relieve the pain and muscle stiffness associated with certain chronic conditions.

“The winners tonight are the patients who have been suffering and finally have the treatment option they have been waiting for,” Matthew Allen, director of the Massachusetts Patient Advocacy Alliance, said in a statement.

All New England states but New Hampshire now have - legalized medical marijuana in some form.

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Under the Massachusetts law, patients with HIV, multiple sclerosis, hepatitis C, and other conditions will be able to get a card from the state permitting them to purchase the drug and will be allowed to possess a 60-day supply. They also may appoint a caregiver to obtain the drug on their behalf.

The Department of Public Health is charged with writing rules within about four months to fully implement the law and with registering at least one nonprofit distribution center in each county, with up to 35 allowed in 2013.

Eric McCoy, 59, of Boston, who has multiple sclerosis and has used marijuana medically for 17 years, expressed relief.

“Now that this law has been passed, it will finally be legal and safe for myself and many others in the state to procure the medicine,” he said.

Kelly Sielis, 21, a Boston University student and first-time voter, said she has watched her mother deal with anxiety as she undergoes cancer treatment. Sielis believes some patients might reasonably look to marijuana as “a more natural alternative” to other medications. “I think the illegalization of marijuana is outdated,” she said.

Johanna Mendillo, 34, of Jamaica Plain, also voted in favor of the ballot question.

“I trust patients and doctors under tremendously difficult circumstances and under tremendous pain to handle their marijuana use appropriately,” Mendillo said.

Some saw the initiative as a veiled step toward full legalization of the drug.

The ballot effort was funded in large part by Peter Lewis, chairman of the Progressive insurance company, who has said he supports lifting the ban on marijuana.

The Massachusetts Medical Society, the state’s largest physicians group, opposed the proposal, saying large clinical trials and federal regulators, not popular opinion, should determine whether marijuana has therapeutic value.

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‘We didn’t have enough time. We didn’t have enough money. But we’re going to keep working on this issue.’

But supporters of the law say the typical drug-approval process has been thwarted by federal drug policy.

“Until its effectiveness is proven clinically and accepted by the FDA, we urge physicians to refrain from recommending [marijuana] to their patients,” Richard Aghababian, president of the society, said in a statement Tuesday night.

Other opponents worried the law could lead to more recreational marijuana use among teenagers, who may believe the drug is safe once it is labeled as medicine. They warned that marijuana produced in state-sanctioned facilities could be diverted to the black market, as has happened in other states.

“We just opened our door to a billion-dollar industry that can capitalize on anyone with pain and our young people,” said Heidi Heilman, president of the Massachusetts Prevention Society.

Opponents, she said, did not have the money to fight the ballot initiative effectively.

Molly O’Connell, 33, said she went back and forth but ultimately decided to vote no when she cast her ballot at Duxbury Middle School. She worried about the effect on teens. “I teach high school, and I see how readily available marijuana is now,” she said.

Abuse of the law to sell marijuana for nonmedical purposes will be considered a felony punishable by up to five years in state prison.

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