

## Medical marijuana movement still faces much opposition

**A** little background: Carl Olsen has been at the forefront of Iowa's marijuana legalization effort for more than a decade. From 1992 to 2002, he was the state coordinator for the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws. He's still on the state board of directors, but has recently found himself at odds with the group's overall approach.

**In the news:** Legalization of marijuana for medical purposes was part of the Iowa Democratic Party's state platform in 2000, 2002 and again this year. But the party's legislative leaders, such as U.S. Rep. Leonard Boswell, continue to oppose the idea.

**Q: What's the outlook for medical marijuana laws in Iowa?**

**A:** State law in Iowa has recognized the medical use of marijuana since 1974, so Boswell is apparently caving in to the farm mongers and taking the wrong side on this issue for what I suspect are political reasons. I would guess he doesn't know enough about the issue to defend a favorable vote supporting state medical marijuana laws in California. I met with Boswell several months ago and thought he had agreed to support withholding funding from the

DEA for medical marijuana raids in California. I guess I got snookered.

**Q: What's the status of NORML membership? Is it growing?**

**A:** I really don't take NORML very seriously. Any organization that published a "Guide for Responsible Marijuana Use" is asking for trouble. It's not responsible to put your life in danger by exposing yourself to arrest, and it's even less responsible to put other people in jeopardy of being associated with criminal activity. NORML's focus should be the legalization of marijuana and not ways of breaking the law responsibly. Is that an oxymoron, or what?

**Q: How do you fight the Cheech and Chong, "High Times" stereotypes and get**

**lawmakers to pay attention?**

**A:** You don't. Lawmakers are not going to get within spitting distance of someone breaking the law. That notion is just absurd, and NORML needs to change its image immediately.

**Q: A lot of people think medical pot is the only remedy for fibromyalgia and other tissue maladies. Are those sufferers the core of your support?**

**A:** Yes, medical users can make a credible argument for breaking the law.

**Q: How did you get involved with the movement?**

**A:** I smoked pot in 1968, and that was a revelation for me. I became a distributor. I went to prison in 1984 and wasn't able to resume my role as a distributor, so I decided to stop using marijuana in 1990 and became politically active. I got my right to vote back in 1992.

**Q: What's your affiliation?**

**A:** I've been a Democrat since 1998, and I've been secretary of the Iowa Democratic Party state

# QUESTIONS

The Des Moines Register DM

## CARL OLSEN



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## Your suggestions

The Register each Tuesday will interview prominent people in the community. Readers are welcome to suggest topics for this feature by e-mailing Randy Essex at [ressex@dmreg.com](mailto:ressex@dmreg.com) or calling (515) 284-8461.

platform committee in 1998, 2000, 2002 and again in 2004.

**Q: Who’s the bigger impediment to your marijuana**

**agenda, the religious right or law enforcement groups?**

**A:** I don’t know the answer, but I suspect that law enforcement is less political than the religious right. I just don’t see a lot of law enforcement people expressing strong opinions on what the law should be, since their primary function is to enforce the laws and not to create the laws.

**Q: Do you think Clinton inhaled?**

**A:** Why bother if you don’t inhale?

**Q: Is Iowa ahead of or behind the curve in terms of marijuana laws?**

**A:** I think Iowa is behind, but that’s just an opinion. We don’t have the ability to put questions like marijuana legalization on the ballot here, so that has a lot to do with it.

**Q: Bush, Kerry, or does it matter?**

**A:** As I mentioned earlier, 66 percent of U.S. House Democrats voted to deny funding to the DEA to raid the medical marijuana users in California. Only 19 Republicans voted to withhold that funding, and Iowa’s Jim Leach was one of those 19. I will do anything to get a Democrat elected over a Republican. I would even vote against Jim Leach, because he strengthens a party that is generally in the Stone Age — pardon the pun — when it comes to drug laws. It’s unfortunate the Iowa Democrats are like the left wing of the Republican Party, but generally Democrats are better on criminal justice law reform issues, particularly drug laws.

**Q: What’s in store for NORML in 2005?**

**A:** I hope NORML gets a clue in 2005, but I suspect its support amongst law-breakers is so great that it would collapse if it did.

— Larry Ballard