

Local legislator lends an ear and a compassionate heart for medical marijuana

By Mike Ferguson | Posted: Monday, June 21, 2010 2:00 am

MUSCATINE, Iowa - If Iowa supporters of medical marijuana find a sympathetic ear in the Iowa Legislature, it will be because of lawmakers like Jeff Kaufmann.

Kaufmann, R-Wilton, who represents the 79th House District, together with legislative candidate Mark Lofgren of Muscatine, a fellow Republican who's running for the seat in the 80th District currently held by Nathan Reichert, D-Muscatine, attended a Saturday afternoon screening of the documentary film, "Waiting to Inhale," at the Musser Public Library.

Lofgren took notes but offered no public comments.

The event, which attracted 11 people, was sponsored by the group Iowa Patients for Medical Marijuana, founded by Jimmy Morrison, 23, of Muscatine.

Kaufmann urged people who want the law changed, including those with fibromyalgia, cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy and those with Multiple Sclerosis - patients who say marijuana reduces their pain or nausea - to be careful how they lobby their legislators.

"You are asking us to go into the fray, but we can't address your issues without asking the tough questions," he said. "There is no chance for this bill (which would legalize marijuana use for medical purposes only) unless you shut the door and triple lock it" against those who would prefer that Iowa approve marijuana for recreational use, too.

"I'm the only legislator who showed up today. I'm here," he told a crowd who shared with Kaufmann both their pain and their tears, "because my mother suffered from fibromyalgia."

Lisa Jackson, 44, of Crawfordsville, also has fibromyalgia, a chronic condition with symptoms that include pain, tenderness and stiffness in the muscles and joints, and fatigue and anxiety.

She said that smoking marijuana has enabled her to "get out of bed, raise 50 chickens, mow 2 1/2 acres and keep the kids fed and dressed. To me that's a life I can be proud of."

She described a life before trying medicinal marijuana in which "my family carried on around me, but without me."

A little more than two years ago, she said she was seated on her bed holding her husband's gun, ready to take her own life. Then her husband walked into the room, and the two had a heart-to-heart talk about "how our lives had to change."

For her the most beneficial change was when she began smoking half an ounce of marijuana each week.

"My children know I smoke and why," she said, her talk interrupted a few times by tears. "In many ways they have paid a higher price than I have."

Kaufmann said he got his first inkling of Iowans' strong support for a change in the law during what he called a "listening post" event in Clarence.

"It doesn't get much more conservative than Clarence," he said. "I threw out (the topic of) medical marijuana and at least 90 percent of them said they believed we should continue to have the discussion."

"It's an idea," he added, "that you've convinced me needs to be discussed (in the Legislature). We're still small enough (in Iowa) that people talking to (legislators) can change our minds."

"Now," he said of the proposal, "we need to make it politically viable."

After the film, Morrison talked about the prospects of following up February's vote by the Iowa Board of Pharmacy to recommend that the Legislature remove marijuana as a Schedule I drug, which by definition have no medicinal use and a high probability of addiction.

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Medical marijuana proposals died during the 2010 session. Morrison said he and Jackson want to help form a study group that includes patients, scientists, law enforcement officials and drug treatment providers.

Kaufmann said he supports that idea, even if it's not appointed by the Legislature.

"We read reports from task forces all the time," he said. "Sometimes we turn them into bills."