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Medical marijuana debate comes to Q-C

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By Christina Salter, csalter@qconline.com

The national debate over medical marijuana came to the Quad-Cities Saturday afternoon at a free documentary screening and forum at the Bettendorf Public Library.

Jimmy Morrison, an organizer for the Marijuana Policy Project, hosted the screening of "Waiting to Inhale." Six people attended the screening, which was followed by patient testimonies on the value of medical marijuana and a discussion of ongoing legal proceedings.

The 75-minute film covered marijuana's history in the United States, including various studies on the drug's uses, the development of laws and medical policies, and the stories of patients who were denied or allowed to use the drug for medical reasons.

Attendees discussed Iowa Senate Bill 293, introduced by state Sen. Joe Bolkcom, D-Iowa City, in March, which proposes legalizing prescription marijuana use for patients with specified debilitating medical conditions. Mr. Morrison expects the bill will be debated in spring 2010.

Thirteen U.S. states allow restricted marijuana use for patients with specified medical conditions. Bills permitting its use are pending in several additional states.

Mr. Morrison said he used marijuana for three years to help with his bipolar disorder and often was beaten, threatened and robbed while attempting to obtain the drug illegally. Though Sen. Bolkcom's bill would not allow marijuana use for bipolar disorder, Mr. Morrison hopes the law could be a "stepping stone" for future amendments.

Ray Lakers said he was diagnosed in 2004 with multiple sclerosis. He said he began using marijuana to help with the disease's symptoms, was arrested for possession in 2005 and served seven days in jail.

"I'm just looking forward to a change real soon in the law," Mr. Lakers said. "There's a lot more people who are a lot less fortunate and have to endure a lot greater costs."

Lawrence Allen, a retired doctor of oncology who attended the event, said he had a Hodgkin's disease patient 30 years ago who asked to use marijuana to combat the severe nausea caused by chemotherapy. Mr. Allen said he "looked the other way" and the patient found relief from marijuana and later was cured of his disease.

"I know how these chronic conditions can cause enormous pain and suffering," he said. "To me it just seems so political and so stupid that (medical marijuana bills) are not allowed to go through Congress."

Jeff Elton came from Des Moines to attend the event. Mr. Elton said he has been using marijuana since he was diagnosed with diabetic neuropathic gastroparesis in 2005.

The disease causes delayed stomach emptying or rejection of food. Marijuana helps him manage the condition, while the legal drug that he was prescribed can cause irreversible shakes and tremors, he said.

"I've already got one lifelong disease, I don't need another," Mr. Elton said.

Medical marijuana lobbyist Carl Olsen discussed the petitions he has filed at the state and federal levels to allow the drug's use. Mr. Olsen said his petition asked that Iowa change marijuana's Schedule I status, meaning it has no accepted medical value, on the grounds that 13 other states have done so.

The Drug Enforcement Administration denied his state petition in December 2008, and the Iowa Board of Pharmacy rejected his appeal on June 1, Mr. Olsen said. The federal petition he filed in January 2009 is still pending, he said.

Mr. Morrison said he was disappointed with the event's small turnout but hoped for higher interest at similar events he plans to hold in Cedar Rapids, Sioux City, Ames, Cedar Falls and Iowa City. He received a grant from the Marijuana Policy Project to host the screenings.