



## **1,100 Sheridan County residents signed marijuana legalization petitions**

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SHERIDAN — Over the last three months, 1,100 Sheridan County residents signed a pair of petitions garnering support for a pair of potential ballot measures regarding marijuana in Wyoming.

The issues raised in the petitions — reducing penalties for possessing 4 ounces or less of marijuana and legalizing the drug for medical use — are complicated and multifaceted, according to Sheridan Police Chief Travis Koltiska, and citizens should take time to research the pros and cons of legalization before making a decision.

“This has been a discussion across the state for many years, and there is language trying to sway people on both sides of the issue,” Koltiska said. “When people look at this petition, they need to educate themselves on the facts. Because some good things might come of it, but some bad things might as well. It’s a complicated issue from our perspective.”

The current ballot initiative efforts are being led statewide by the Libertarian Party of Wyoming, and locally by Mona Mitzel, a Sheridan County advocate for medical marijuana.

Mitzel said her efforts have been inspired by a good friend who died of breast cancer and used medical marijuana in her final months of life. The drug allowed her friend to make the most of a difficult time, Mitzel said.

“When she was using medical marijuana, she could walk and drink and eat,” Mitzel said. “She could travel and see her grandkids. She thought it was a cure, and it didn’t work out that way. But it definitely improved her quality of life.”

Currently, 38 states — including the bordering states of Montana, South Dakota, Utah and Colorado —have legalized marijuana for medical purposes. According to the Cato Institute, a Libertarian think tank, medical marijuana advocates hope the pain-relieving element of the drug may help patients avoid more harmful and addictive prescription painkillers and tranquilizers. They also believe the drug can be an effective treatment for bipolar disorder, depression and other mood disorders.

Those hopes have been echoed by many who have signed the petitions to date, Mitzel said. Over 80% of the people who signed the petition in Mitzel’s first drive-in petition sign-up event were over age 60 and many had serious health concerns, Mitzel said.

“I’ve definitely encountered more older people than younger people,” Mitzel said. “I’ve met people with degenerative diseases that affect the nerves. I’ve met people with MS. I’ve met people who can barely sign their name on the petition. Those people say ‘I really want this and would benefit from it.’”

For his part, Koltiska acknowledged “there are substances that have proven to have medical benefits” in marijuana., but he also worried about the drug’s addictive properties, which could potentially pave the way for substance abuse and crime.

“The potential legalization of marijuana for medical use is concerning because there is potential for abuse of any substance that impairs cognitive ability,” Koltiska said. “It’s the same thing with alcohol. If alcohol wasn’t already legal, I’m not sure I would support legalization efforts based on what we see day-to-day in our department. Over 80% of our arrests are alcohol and drug-related, and it is difficult to be supportive of something that has the potential for serious abuse.”

According to a Cato Institute study of data from states that have legalized marijuana, there are indeed some states that have seen an increase in crime following the legalization of marijuana.

The crime rate in Alaska and Massachusetts increased post-legalization by 152 and 57 crimes per 100,000 people, respectively, compared with the national trend.

However, other states actually saw a decrease in their crime rate, according to the institute. Crime in Maine and Nevada decreased by 90 and 178 crimes per 100,000 people, respectively, compared with the national trend post-legalization. Other states stayed flat with the national trend post-legalization.

“Overall, violent crime has neither soared nor plummeted in the wake of marijuana legalization,” the Cato Institute said in their 2021 update on the effect of state marijuana legalizations.

Currently, a Wyoming resident who brings medical marijuana to their home is twice a criminal — once for transporting marijuana and again for having marijuana in their possession in Wyoming. Koltiska said the police department had over 100 seizures of marijuana in 2021.

Advocates like Mitzel argue it is time to reduce criminal penalties for the possession and use of marijuana. According to the ballot measure being proposed, individuals could not be incarcerated if a resident had 4 ounces of marijuana or less on their person, although fines could be imposed.

“In the later stages of her illness, my friend with breast cancer lost her medical marijuana,” Mitzel said. “She had to pay a couple thousand dollars in legal fees and died a criminal. It just really bothered me that someone who used medical marijuana to get through the day is considered a criminal.”

Koltiska said he had reservations about reducing penalties for the possession of marijuana.

“My concern with upping it to 4 ounces is I don’t know if people understand just how much 4 ounces is,” Koltiska said. “From what we’ve seen, 4 ounces does not signify individual use. Based on that amount, you could likely be distributing. In my mind, 4 ounces is not an amount of marijuana for a single user.”

Mitzel still has a long way to go in her signature collection efforts, and she hopes to eventually collect 3,000 signatures from Sheridan County residents. Statewide, organizers need to gather the number of signatures equal to 15% of votes cast in the last general election. Roughly 278,000 people voted in Wyoming's 2020 general election, which means the initiatives would need more than 41,000 signatures each.

Mitzel said the party does not expect to reach the required number of signatures needed to put the initiatives on the ballot in the 2022 midterms. Instead, the party is aiming for the 2024 general election, she said.

Even if the party collects the number of signatures necessary, success is not guaranteed, Mitzel said. Once the signatures are collected, they have to be turned in to the Secretary of State, whose office verifies each person and their address against the most recent voter logs. Once the signatures are verified, the measures will be added to the ballot and will need to be approved by the majority of Wyoming voters.

Wyoming has not successfully passed a ballot initiative since 1991, and many residents of this conservative-leaning state are still reluctant to embrace cannabis, Mitzel said.

"I think it's possible, but it's going to be hard," Mitzel said. "There's a certain element of people in the community that are very resistant to it...I just want to see the people of Wyoming have a chance to vote on this issue. What's the will of the people in the state? It's time to find out what the people want."

The efforts to pass the ballot initiatives come in the wake of repeated failed attempts to pass medical marijuana legislation in the Wyoming Legislature, Mitzel said. During the 2021 legislative session, a pair of bipartisan bills — one that would have authorized a study on medical marijuana and another aimed at full legalization — died without a hearing in the House.