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### **Marijuana debate heats up as bill to legalize it gets closer to a final vote**

by **DAYNA DION**

**April 13, 2010**

A bill to legalize marijuana for medical purposes in Illinois could come to a final vote, possibly before the spring legislative session adjourns in early May.

Meanwhile, proponents and opponents of legalized marijuana came together for a debate Thursday at the Chicago History Museum.

"It's a topic that has long been stigmatized and criminalized and we're here to talk about that," said Laura Washington, debate moderator and long-time Chicago journalist.

Tim Lynch, director of the Cato Institute's Project on Criminal Justice, took the lead in advocating for marijuana legalization. Arguing against legalization was Jim Leitzel, director of public policy studies at the University of Chicago.

Lynch said by criminalizing marijuana, the U.S. government fuels the black market and "makes gangster organizations rich."

It also drives up law enforcement costs, Lynch said, because "800,000 people are arrested on marijuana violations every year. That takes up a lot of case time, a lot of court time and a lot of prison space."

It also diverts attention away from those who need drug treatment most because courts flood recovery programs with first time offenders, not addicts.

Lynch said that criminalizing marijuana does not stop people from using it.

"What we've gotten is a lot of crime, gang warfare in our cities and corruption in our police departments and prisons," he said.

But Leitzel said decriminalizing marijuana would lead to greater use:

"Everybody would be a potential supplier now to the local high schools."

Legalizing marijuana could also lead to decreased productivity in the workplace and higher unemployment rates. "We will have a lot more adults who are going to be high...expect to see people have a harder time holding jobs," Leitzel said.

Ultimately, many people believe legalizing marijuana is just plain wrong, he said, adding, "It's a question of morality."

Who won the debate? Lynch, who was favored from the start.

Audience members, many of whom proudly admitted to using marijuana, were given an electronic voting pad before and after the debate. Before the debate, 69 percent voted to legalize marijuana for medical and recreational use or legalize marijuana and more. By the end of the hour-long debate, 74 percent said the same.

The bill that is up for a vote in the Illinois House, The Compassionate Use of Medical Cannabis Pilot Program Act, would legalize marijuana for those who have been diagnosed by a physician as having a debilitating medical condition.

A spokesman for the sponsor of the bill, Rep. Lou Lang (D-Skokie), said that the exact timing of the vote is "up in the air." He said Lang is close to securing the 60 votes needed to pass the bill, "but he's not there yet."

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**Related Links**

[Senate Bill 1381: The Compassionate Use of Medical Cannabis Pilot Program Act](#) Contact [Dan Linn](#), executive director of the [Illinois Cannabis Patients Association](#), for information about lobbying day on April 20.



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