

Push to relax marijuana rules picks up speed

Seventeen states and D.C. now authorize marijuana use for medicinal purposes.

By **DAVID KLEPPER**

Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Catharine Leach is married and has two boys, ages 2 and 8. She has a good job with a federal contractor and smokes pot almost every day.

While she worries that her public support for marijuana decriminalization and legalization could cost her a job or bring the police to her door, the 30-year-old resident of Warwick, R.I., said she was tired of feeling like a criminal for using a drug that she said is far less harmful than the glass of wine or can of beer enjoyed by so many others after a long day's work. Like

others around the U.S. working to relax penalties for possession of pot, she decided to stop hiding and speak out.

"I'm done being afraid," she said. "People in this country are finally coming around and seeing that putting someone in jail for this doesn't make sense."

Once consigned to the political fringe, marijuana policy is appearing on legislative agendas around the country thanks to an energized base of supporters and an increasingly open-minded public.

Lawmakers from Rhode Island to Colorado are mulling medical marijuana programs, pot dispensaries, decriminalization and legalization.

Seventeen states and the District of Columbia now authorize medical

marijuana, and 14, including neighboring Connecticut and Massachusetts, have rolled back criminal penalties for possession of small amounts of pot.

Rhode Island is poised to become the 15th state to decriminalize marijuana possession. The state's General Assembly passed legislation last week that would eliminate the threat of big fines or even jail time for the possession of an ounce or less of pot. Instead, adults caught with small amounts of marijuana would face a \$150 civil fine. Police would confiscate the marijuana, but the incident would not appear on a person's criminal record.

Minors caught with pot also would have to complete a drug awareness program and community service.

Gov. Lincoln Chafee has said he is inclined to sign the legislation.

Some supporters of decriminalization say they'd like to go even further.

"America's 50-year war on drugs has been an abysmal failure," said Rep. John Savage, a retired school principal from East Providence. "Marijuana in this country should be legalized. It should be sold and taxed."

Opponents warned about dire consequences of the new policy.

"What kind of message are we sending to our youth? We are more worried about soda — for health reasons — than we are about marijuana," said one opponent, Rhode Island state Rep. John Carnevale, D-Providence.

Medical marijuana helped bring marijuana policy into the mainstream back in 1996, when California became the first state to authorize the use of cannabis for medicinal use. Other states followed suit.

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