

Puerto Rico to debate medical use of marijuana

September 6 2013, by Danica Coto

Legislators in Puerto Rico are preparing to debate a bill that would allow people to use marijuana for medicinal purposes in this conservative U.S. territory, officials said Thursday.

The measure would create a system to legally produce the substance and allow state health officials to regulate it, said Rep. Jose Baez, one of the bill's two authors.

It calls for a classification of [medical conditions](#) and requirements that would allow patients to smoke marijuana in their homes. Conditions would range from cancer to [glaucoma](#) to anxiety.

The measure also would allow the island's health department to award special permits to patients to grow their own pot if they couldn't afford to buy it at an authorized clinic or if they lived too far from the clinics.

"Treating this strictly as something that should be punished has clearly not worked," said Rep. Carlos Vargas, the bill's other author.

The proposal comes shortly after the U.S. federal government pledged not to prosecute or block state pot-legalization laws on the condition that states enact strict and effective regulations.

Last year, Colorado and Washington became the first U.S. states to legalize marijuana use for those over 21. The law, however, bans the public use of marijuana.

Eighteen other states and Washington, D.C., allow medical use of marijuana.

Both Baez and Vargas said Puerto Rico [lawmakers](#) should follow their lead.

"This legislature cannot ignore U.S. trends, especially when these reforms offer concrete and proven solutions to various social and [economic problems](#) that are affecting Puerto Rico," the bill's introduction says.

Earlier this year, a former Puerto Rico [police chief](#) who is now a senator introduced a bill that would legalize marijuana for personal use. Sen. Miguel Pereira, a former federal prosecutor and corrections secretary, said at the time that possession cases were costing the government money and noted that 80 percent of inmates were serving time for non-[violent crimes](#).

The bill, which drew widespread criticism, is still in committee.

Although Puerto Rico is one of several Caribbean islands, including Jamaica and St. Lucia, where activists have pushed to legalize marijuana use, opponents remain.

Sen. Jose Perez said he opposes both pot bills, and in particular feels the medical marijuana measure has too many loopholes.

"How are they going to control this?" he said. "It's a delicate subject. I think they're rushing into this."

Perez said he also worries that people not authorized to grow, buy or sell marijuana for medical use will abuse the system to obtain it.

"Young people are not prepared for this," he said. "If they don't have control over alcohol, who's to say they're going to have control over drugs?"

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