

Pennsylvania set to OK medical marijuana; Ohio could follow

April 13 2016, by By Marc Levy

Pennsylvania is set to become the latest state to legalize medical marijuana as the Legislature sent a bill to the governor on Wednesday after parents of children suffering from debilitating seizures circulated the Capitol urging lawmakers to act.

The House vote, 149-46, set off cheers in the ornate chamber and capped several years of door-to-door lobbying by parents. It's more than a year and a half since the state Senate first approved a medical marijuana bill in 2014. Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf, calling Wednesday's legislation historic, said he will sign it Sunday.

Meanwhile, in Ohio, lawmakers promised to legalize medical marijuana by the summer, before voters get a chance to decide a ballot question in the fall election.

Pennsylvania would become the 24th state to legalize a comprehensive medical marijuana program, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The issue has been driven by parents who believe a marijuana oil extract can help relieve the daily seizures that have left their children in wheelchairs or functioning far below their grade levels. Some parents say they worried the next seizure could be lethal and had traveled countless times to the Capitol to press their case.

Diana Briggs, of Export, near Pittsburgh, called her husband with the

news moments after watching the House vote.

"Bringing home a win tonight," Briggs, wiping away tears, told him.

Briggs said she hopes to help her 15-year-old son, Ryan Briggs, who suffered a brain injury at birth and has had daily seizures that have left him in a wheelchair, unable to talk or walk. Nothing has helped much, including pharmaceuticals, [stem cell therapy](#), diet or electrical nerve stimulation therapy, Briggs said.

Christine Brann, of suburban Hummelstown, said every day without a medical marijuana law in Pennsylvania is a risk for people who believe their suffering children may not survive another day.

"Every day we roll the dice on our child's or our loved one's life," said Brann, whose 5-year-old son, Garrett Brann, has a severe form of epilepsy known as Dravet syndrome.

The bill sets standards for tracking marijuana plants, certifying physicians and licensing growers, dispensaries and physicians. Patients could take marijuana in pill, oil, vapor or liquid form but would not be able to legally obtain marijuana to smoke or to grow their own.

The Pennsylvania Medical Society opposed the bill. Its president said in a statement it has serious concerns about the effectiveness of medical marijuana but hopes patients, especially children, see positive outcomes.

One opponent, Rep. Matt Baker, R-Tioga, warned that the bill violates federal drug laws and that the state would see a drastic impact on addiction and abuse.

"There's serious consequences associated with this monumental piece of legislation," Baker told colleagues during floor speech before the vote.

In Ohio on Wednesday, state lawmakers set an aggressive schedule for legislation that would allow licensed doctors to prescribe edibles, patches, plant material and oils. Rep. Kirk Schuring, a Canton Republican who chaired a medical marijuana task force, said it will prohibit home growing, which he says is too difficult to control.

Lawmakers said that polling during a more sweeping ballot campaign that failed last year made clear to the Republican-controlled state Legislature that the issue wasn't going away.

Ian James, who led last year's marijuana legalization effort, called the House proposal historic.

"We've never had in the state's history a time when the Statehouse has so thoroughly vetted medical marijuana, considered its positives, its negatives and brought so many people together," he said.

In Pennsylvania, the legislation's list of 17 qualifying diagnosed conditions includes cancer, epilepsy, autism, Parkinson's disease, post-traumatic stress disorder, sickle cell anemia, multiple sclerosis, AIDS and glaucoma.

Physicians must be registered by the state to certify that a patient has an eligible condition and a patient must get a Department of Health-issued ID card.

The legislation's drafters say they expect it would be two years before regulations are written and retailers are ready to sell to patients. However, a safe harbor provision in the bill would allow parents to avoid the wait by legally buying [medical marijuana](#) from another state for their children.

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