

Arkansas court upholds medical marijuana proposal

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(AP)—The Arkansas Supreme Court upheld a proposed ballot measure Thursday that, if successful, would make the state the first in the more conservative southern U.S. to legalize medical marijuana.

Justices rejected a challenge by a coalition of conservative groups who wanted to block the measure from a November vote.

The measure would allow patients with qualifying conditions, such as cancer, glaucoma, HIV, AIDS and Alzheimer's disease, to buy marijuana from nonprofit dispensaries with a doctor's recommendation. A provision would allow minors to use it with parental consent.

The proposal acknowledges that marijuana is still illegal under federal law, but opponents argue that it doesn't adequately explain that users could face federal prosecution.

"This is about the first incremental step to legalizing marijuana for recreational use," said coalition member Larry Page, the director of the Arkansas Faith and Ethics Council.

Seventeen states and the District of Columbia have legalized marijuana in some fashion. Massachusetts voters are also expected to vote on the issue this fall, while the North Dakota Supreme Court ruled that a medical marijuana initiative can't appear on that state's ballot.

The Washington-based Marijuana Policy Project has provided most of

the funding for the Arkansas campaign, contributing \$251,000.

Officials with the group said they stepped in after polling showed strong support for the measure. Group leaders also cited a "symbolic" value in passing a medical marijuana law in the South.

"I think it's a sign that marijuana policy reform is an idea that is coming of age now across the nation, rather than just in the states where we've seen it so far," said Morgan Fox, the group's communications director. "It's really an important moment."

Gov. Mike Beebe, who is opposed to the proposal, told reporters he doesn't believe voters would legalize medical marijuana.

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