

Hearing set on medical pot use

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Proponents of medical marijuana in Michigan are gearing up for their cause's most significant initiative in the state in decades.

The Government Operations Committee of the Michigan State House on Tuesday will host a hearing in Lansing on House Bill 5470, which would allow marijuana use under a doctor's supervision.

Speakers will include Penny Bacchiochi, a Republican member of the Connecticut state legislature, and Don Murphy, a former state legislator from Maryland who now heads the Republicans for Compassionate Access.

Testimonials from patients are scheduled as well, including Florida stockbroker Irvin Rosenfeld, who according to the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws is one of five surviving patients still receiving medical marijuana from the federal government as part of a program that was closed to new patients in 1992. Cancer and multiple sclerosis patients from Kalamazoo and Detroit are scheduled to speak and hundreds of activists are expected to attend. The committee will also hear from opponents, though no organizations have begun lobbying against the bill, officials said.

"This is a real important day for our continued progress," said Chuck Ream, a Scio Township trustee who in 2004 spearheaded a ballot measure decriminalizing marijuana use when recommended by a physician. It passed with 74 percent of the vote in Ann Arbor. Voters in Detroit, Ferndale and Traverse City passed similar laws, and the issue will appear on the ballot in Flint in February.

A hearing on the bill, co-sponsored by seven Democrats (including Chris Kolb, D-Ann Arbor) and lone Republican Leon Drolet, R-Macomb Twp., follows Election Day setbacks on similar statewide ballot proposals in Colorado, South Dakota and Nevada. Those defeats have in turn raised the national profile of efforts in Michigan, Ream said.

"It's very important for the movement to have a stronghold in the Midwest because so far it's only been adopted predominantly on the West Coast, and it needs something to continue some momentum," Ream said.

If passed, the law would put Michigan with 11 other states in protecting from arrest and possibly jail seriously ill patients who use marijuana with their physician's recommendation.

Tuesday's hearing may have a lot to do with whether the issue ever comes up for a vote.

Drolet, chairman of the Government Operations Committee, said he hadn't talked to committee members about sending the legislation to the House floor, but intended at least to give it a formal hearing.

Civics lesson by robo-call

Many voters have little use and rather great disdain for the flurry of automated calls on behalf of political candidates on the eve of an election. But don't tell that to 9-year-old Paris Mitzelfeld of Scio Township.

The fourth-grader at Emerson School provided the voice and part of the script for a "robo-call" placed to more than 590,000 Tennessee voters the night before the Nov. 7 general election. The calls were on behalf of U.S. Rep. Harold Ford Jr., whose attempt to win a U.S. Senate seat failed.

"It was a lot of fun and really exciting to be part of the campaign," said Paris, who went to Tennessee with her family to volunteer for Ford's campaign. Ford graduated from the University of Michigan Law School with Mitzelfeld's father, Jim, an assistant U.S. attorney based in Detroit.

Paris was initially told by Ford's campaign staff that she was too young to join her parents in making volunteer phone bank calls the weekend before the election. But when the national coordinator for the Senate Democrats heard Paris' campaign slogan while she painted signs for a get-out-the-vote-rally, they tossed out four other ideas for the automated calls and rushed to record her, officials said.

In a sweet and articulate voice, the Michigan native told Tennessee voters that, while she's not yet old enough to cast a ballot, they were

making a decision that could change her future. She ended the 20-second spot urging support for Ford over Republican opponent Bob Corker by saying "put Corker back in the bottle."

Paris said she first thought of the phrase while coping with the boredom of the 10-hour drive to Tennessee and was surprised by the response.

Campaign staff seemed smitten by the idea of a robo-call coming from a witty child instead of adults and celebrities from out of state, said Paris' mother, Lisa, who served as a campaign press secretary for former Michigan Gov. Jim Blanchard.

It also gave Paris some unexpected clout with her teachers and classmates.

"My teachers were excited and my friends thought it was pretty strange but pretty cool at the same time," said Paris, who said she's already eying student government positions when she gets to middle school.

"I learned that it's possible for someone young to make a difference," she said.

Gongwer News Service contributed to this report.

This is an occasional feature focusing on local and state politics. Have info or a suggestion for a topic? Art Aisner can be reached at aaisner@annarbornews.com or 734-994-6823.

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