

10-7-96 Page 3

Des Moines rally supports Waterloo man in trouble for medicinal use of marijuana

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For the Courier

DES MOINES

Supporters of legislation to allow some medical patients to smoke marijuana rallied at the state Capitol Sunday, calling on lawmakers to "end this insanity" of sending suffering people to prison.

Carl Olsen, director of Iowans for Medical Marijuana also urged the crowd of about 60 to support Allen Helmers of Waterloo, who faces a possible prison term for his use of pot to relieve the pain he suffers as a result of fibromyagia, a disease that attacks soft tissues.

"In any war we have to take care of the sick and wounded first," Olsen said of attempts at the national and state level to decriminalize the use of marijuana.

Also at the Capitol were George McMahon of Bode, and Barbara Douglass of Lakeside, two of eight people in the United States legally allowed to smoke marijuana for medical purposes under a federal program that has been cut back over the last few years.

"Let's stop this insanity," McMahon said. "Let's stop them from saying we're a bunch of criminals. He likened the situation to persecution of the ailing and infirm in Nazi Germany.

"God put this (marijuana) right here for us," said Douglass. "Let us have what's already here."

McMahon, 46, suffers from congenital nailpattela syndrome, which causes abnormalities in the skeletal system and numerous organs throughout the body. Douglass, 40, has multiple sclerosis.

Olsen called for stepped-up efforts to convince state lawmakers of the benefits of marijuana in medicine, specifically to relieve pain and nausea.

"The more of those people who hear from you the more likely it is that we'll get something done," Olsen said.

He added, however, that chances for passage of measures to legalize some medical marijuana uses appear slim in the upcoming legislative session. Olsen said such a move would have bipartisan support, but not nearly enough.

He also noted that the more demonstrated public support there is for medical uses of marijuana, the more likely a judge would show leniency in individual cases.

"Modern society doesn't recognize this as a medicine," Olsen said. "For thousands of years we used nothing but plants for medicine, and now all of a sudden we are so wise that all we need are chemicals that come from the industrial companies."

Helmers, 48, who faces a probation-revocation hearing Oct. 28 because he continues to smoke marijuana, told the rally that current restrictions "force patients into the black market to relieve their pain."

"I have talked and cried with many

people who have told me of the agonies they have been through watching their loved ones waste away ... when marijuana that could have helped was illegal," Helmers said. "When compassion and common sense are in conflict with the law, then the law is wrong."

Besides the soft-tissue disease, Helmers said he continues to suffer from back and other injuries he received in several traffic accidents dating back to 1980. He said more conventional medications do not relieve the pain.

Olsen cited state senators Elaine Syzmoniak, D-Des Moines, and Jim Lind, R-Waterloo, as being among supporters of allowing marijuana to be used by some medical patients.

But neither were at the rally, and Syzmoniak, in an interview later Sunday, said that although marijuana "probably does help some people," she has no intention of sponsoring legislation to allow for its use as a prescription drug.

"I don't believe in introducing bills that are not going to go any place," Syzmoniak said. "There is very little support for that."

Lind said he supports such legislation as long as the treatment is under a doctor's supervision and in cases where other medications do not help.

As for chances of passage, Lind said: "When you're on the side of what's right and you have tenacity, things will pass."

The Waterloo - Cedar Falls Courier
Monday, October 7, 1996, Page 3