

LDS Church issues statement on proposed Utah marijuana initiative

By Ben Lockhart, KSL | **Updated Apr 10th, 2018**

SALT LAKE CITY — The First Presidency of the LDS Church weighed in Tuesday on Utah's proposed marijuana ballot initiative.

A prepared statement from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints says: "We commend the Utah Medical Association for its statement of March 30, 2018, cautioning that the proposed Utah marijuana initiative would compromise the health and safety of Utah communities."

That statement the First Presidency is referring to is the recent lengthy release by the Utah Medical Association, in which the trade organization stated it "unequivocally" opposes the ballot initiative campaign seeking medical marijuana legalization in Utah, arguing that "the initiative is not medical."

"The initiative ... allows various non-physician practitioners to recommend marijuana for clients," the association said on March 30. "The clients with a recommendation would visit a dispensary, staffed by non-medically trained personnel who would be tasked with deciding what product would be best for the client's condition."

The Utah Medical Association has criticized the ballot initiative as a de facto recreational marijuana bill. Multiple Republican state legislators have said the same thing, contending that the measure would make it very difficult for police to enforce laws on recreational use.

The church's First Presidency said Tuesday: "We respect the wise counsel of the medical doctors of Utah. The public interest is best served when all new drugs designed to relieve suffering and illness and the procedures by which they are made available to the public undergo the scrutiny of medical scientists and official approval bodies."

Shortly after advocates first filed ballot initiative paperwork with the state last year, LDS Church spokesman Eric Hawkins said in a prepared statement, "We believe that society is best served by requiring marijuana to go through further research and the FDA approval process that all other drugs must go through before they are prescribed to patients."

Tuesday marks the first time since then that the church has weighed in on the issue, and the first time that it has expressed support for the arguments made by any of the parties that have debated over the merits of the initiative.

The ballot initiative campaign, called the Utah Patients Coalition, is pushing for Utah voters to adopt a law called the Utah Medical Cannabis Act at the ballot box in November. They are expected to gather enough petition signatures by the April 15 deadline to get it on the ballot.

The ballot initiative would allow people with one of several illnesses to apply for a medical cannabis card. Someone who suffers chronic pain could also get a card under certain conditions.

The Utah Patients Coalition has previously criticized calls for additional research and federal clearance for marijuana prior to legalization for medical use, saying robust studies into marijuana's health benefits are plentiful worldwide.

Reaction

The Utah Patients Coalition responded to the church's statement Tuesday with a statement from Dr. Dan Cottam, who is a medical adviser for the campaign.

"As a member of the Utah Medical Association and its legislative policy committee, I was never consulted about my position on the medical use of cannabis," Cottam said. "Like many of my physician colleagues, I look forward to having the option of getting my suffering patients legal access to this remedy. There is a vast body of scientific literature which supports its use."

Cottam added that the Utah Medical Association's position "reflects nothing more than the opinion of its board.

"Far from being based on research or science, let alone on the consensus of the doctors they purport to represent, it is a position that does not speak for many doctors like myself who are prepared to provide this medicine to our patients."

Together for Responsible Use and Cannabis Education, or TRUCE, said Tuesday that it is disappointed at how much weight is given to the Utah Medical Association's stance by the LDS Church.

"It is essential that both the church and the voters of Utah understand that the UMA does not represent all of the physicians in this state," said Dr. Andrew Talbott, the group's medical director.

"In fact, less than one-third of all licensed physicians and surgeons in the state of Utah are members of the UMA," he said. "As such, the UMA is not qualified to purport that they are the voice for Utah's medical providers and should not make decisions that have such a great impact on the patients of Utah."

DJ Schanz, director of the Utah Patients Coalition campaign, said in a statement Tuesday that the initiative being sought includes the medical oversight that the LDS Church is concerned about.

"The LDS Church should be commended for its concern with public health and safety — laudable goals we are pursuing with our proposal," Schanz said. "Too many patients face criminalization and unrelated, dangerous products as they pursue their own health. Oversight from regulators and doctors, as provided by the Utah Medical Cannabis Act, would increase public health and safety while providing safe access to patients who need this treatment option."

The Utah Medical Association's statement from March 30 says that, from the ballot initiative campaign's arguments, "people assume that physicians would have some idea of how to

recommend it safely, for which diagnoses, and understand ... dosing guidelines for a plant that is wildly diverse and inconsistent in active ingredients."

Poll: Utahns, Mormons show strong support for legalizing medical marijuana

Seventy-three percent of Utahns favor legalizing the medical use of marijuana, including strong majorities of Republicans and members of the LDS Church who self-identify as "very active," new poll states.

"None of this is the case with what is being proposed in the (initiative). Physicians cannot prescribe it at all," the association said at the time.

The association's statement was issued in a series of reactions to Gov. Gary Herbert's announcement last month in which he promised to "actively oppose" the initiative, which he said "would potentially open the door to recreational use."

The Utah Patients Coalition responded at the time by saying Herbert's stance was an example of "politicians standing between patients and their physicians." The Utah Medical Association then published its March 30 statement, specifically rebutting the campaign's statement about patients and physicians, saying none of "backers of this initiative speak for the physicians of Utah, nor for the majority of their patients."

The group Together for Responsible Use and Cannabis Education then said last week that the Utah Patients Coalition's rebuttal statement represented "brazen attempts to muddle and deceive."

What initiative does

The initiative allows patients with several enumerated illnesses, including cancer, Alzheimer's disease, HIV, Crohn's disease, multiple sclerosis and post-traumatic stress disorder, to apply for a medical cannabis card "with the recommending physician while in the ... physician's office."

Additionally, a person with an exceptionally rare disease, as those are defined under the law, would be able to qualify. A person with chronic pain could also get a medical cannabis card if their doctor "determines (they are) at risk of becoming chemically dependent on, or overdosing, on opiate-based pain medication" or are medically unable to take opioids for another reason.

The initiative also sets up an appointed "Compassionate Use Board," made up of five physicians, who would have the authority to give approval for use of a medical cannabis board to "an individual who is not otherwise qualified ... if the individual offers ... satisfactory evidence that the individual suffers from a condition that substantially impairs the individual's quality of life and is intractable."

Doctors would not be allowed to recommend cannabis to more than 20 percent of their patients, though oncologists, anesthesiologists, neurologists, psychiatrists and gastroenterologists are among those exempted from that regulation.

Some state legislators have heavily criticized a provision in the initiative which states that, before July 1, 2020 — a few months after the state would be ready to issue medical cannabis cards — it is a valid defense against criminal charges for a person to demonstrate that they would have been eligible for such a card, but don't physically have one.

Initiative opponents said that portion of the measure makes enforcement of laws against recreational use of marijuana almost impossible. Legalization advocates have characterized it as a responsible way to safeguard legitimate patients before cards are available.

Marijuana polls

Multiple polls conducted on behalf of Utah Policy have shown a majority of LDS Church members who self-identify as "very active" have indicated support for the poll question: "Do you support or oppose legalizing doctor-prescribed use of non-smoking marijuana for certain diseases and pain relief?"

The most recent Utah Policy poll, conducted in February, found that 66 percent of such church members were in support, compared to 61 percent who were in favor in response to the same poll question in November.

Of all Utah registered voters who answered the survey in February, 77 percent said they strongly or somewhat support legalizing medical marijuana as posed in the question.

The polls did not ask about specific support of the ballot initiative.