

## **Pennsylvania Lawmakers Mull Legalizing Recreational Marijuana**

**By Beth Brelje, *Epoch Times***

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The debate over legalizing marijuana for recreational use in Pennsylvania is no longer asking if it should be done, but how to regulate it.

The Pennsylvania Senate Law and Justice Committee on Monday completed its third and final public hearing studying the impact of implementing an adult-use marijuana law. Pennsylvania already allows the purchase of marijuana, through a doctor, for medical use.

“We’re fortunate to already have an established medical marijuana program in Pennsylvania which has laid the basic groundwork for licensing, growing, manufacturing, and selling cannabis through a state-regulated system,” Republican state Sen. Mike Regan, committee majority chair, said during the hearing.

He says his support of legalization is not a sign that he is going soft on crime—it is his way of fighting crime.

“It’s a multibillion-dollar industry that is financing murder incorporated,” Regan told *The Epoch Times* in a phone interview after the hearing. “Police officers and DAs have decriminalized personal use amounts. So you know who makes out here? The bad guys. And now it’s complicated by the fact that it’s unsafe. They lace it with fentanyl, embalming fluid, PCP, and there’s also pathogens that are harmful to you. My rallying cry has been, let’s make it safe, let’s take the money out of the hands of the bad guys, let’s tax it, regulate it, and make it something where we can help law enforcement organizations.”

The committee has been hearing testimony in recent weeks and will work next on crafting legislation defining the rules surrounding adult use of marijuana. But Regan says he would still have to convince a lot of Republicans to support recreational use for a bill to move forward.

Representatives of the marijuana industry testified about their recommendations for building a regulatory program, about the current market; and when asked, most had similar complaints about poor communication from Pennsylvania’s Office of Medical Marijuana, run through the Department of Health as a regulatory agency for the medical industry.

“We have had reasonable and more challenging interactions with the Department of Health,” testified Sara Payne, Vice President for Government Affairs, at Jushi Inc., a multi-state company developing cannabis products and stores. “Some of the things that have been most difficult for us to overcome in terms of the communications issues have been the unavailability of the department to take meetings, take calls, have open conversations about the department’s expectations about policies and practices.”

Most of the testifiers recommended creating a new state agency to oversee the marijuana industry.

Regan envisions an advisory board instead, with representatives from law enforcement, drug abuse counselors, and others relevant to the industry.

Another recommendation was to keep taxes on recreational marijuana low so the cost is competitive.

“When you think about taxation, you don’t want to see cannabis as a cash cow. It’s not. It’s only about 1 percent of a state budget,” testified Bryan Murray, executive vice president of government relations at

Acreage Holdings, a marijuana investment firm. “I know we often talk about tax and cannabis, but I just want to make sure that when you think about cannabis that it’s not overtaxed, because that will drive people back to the illicit market.”

High cost was identified as a problem for medical marijuana users. Because it is not covered by insurance, patients are paying \$150–200 a month. Some stop going to dispensaries and look for illegal dealers to provide marijuana. Payne said the remedy is a patient fund that would lower the cost for patients. The goal is to see it funded, with money flowing out to patients in need.

“I think that has been [a] source of confusion and frustration in the program to date,” Payne testified. “The alternative to being able to access and afford a regulated product is looking to unregulated options, or conventional pharmaceuticals, that in some cases carry meaningful side effects that patients struggle to manage.”

The Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry, which did not testify at the hearing, says marijuana use is a major concern in the workplace. Businesses are concerned about worker safety and liability issues if someone is involved in an accident.

“A lot of our members are concerned over their inability to determine who among their employees might be a user of medical marijuana because there are reasons why they can’t ask them, yet there they’ve got people who have a medical marijuana card and are driving forklifts, driving semis, which leads to a lot of workplace safety issues and of course liability issues,” Gene Barr, president and CEO of the chamber, told The Epoch Times. “Our perspective, as it relates to the legalization of recreational use, is that we still haven’t figured out how to make medical marijuana work. We still have issues with that. We should work out all those issues before we expand the utilization of it.”

During the hearing, Republican state Sen. Judy Ward asked about workplace safety and driving under the influence.

There are no easy answers. A test to measure marijuana impairment in drivers or workers has not been perfected.

“The thought of adult use cannabis in the commonwealth is a huge policy shift and a process that needs thorough vetting. This is an extremely complicated issue with many facets, and it deserves much discussion. These hearings have been extensive,” Ward said during the hearing, “But they’ve only presented us one side of the argument. There are many stakeholders who want, and quite frankly deserve to be heard. We need to hear from drug and alcohol professionals, chiefs of police, and the Pennsylvania Chamber to name a few. There are many questions and concerns as we look into this issue. As chairwoman of Aging and Youth, I plan to use my committee to look at some of these issues.”

The Pennsylvania Family Institute has closely watched the hearings and noted that all three hearings were platforms for people within the marijuana industry, but there were no testifiers discussing the drawbacks of marijuana use.

“It’s so discouraging to have such a one-sided affair with these hearings. To invite the marijuana industry, those that have a conflict of interest and would directly profit from more people using this drug. They profit from somebody being addicted to marijuana. Why not have people that don’t have

that interest, that don't make money off the sale of this, as part of the hearing," Dan Bartkowiak, director of communications for Pennsylvania Family Institute, told The Epoch Times.

Retired Superior Court Judge Cheryl Allen, who spent 25 years in Pennsylvania's juvenile court system, recently spoke with the Pennsylvania Family Institute about marijuana use. Here is what she said in the interview:

"There's no such thing as a harmless substance when it's a mind-altering chemical. So many people think that marijuana is harmless. It is not. It does contribute to cognitive decline, especially in young people. It contributes to a lack of productivity. We don't want to see more young people who employ a mechanism for dropping out of society. We have too much of that now."

If a bill allowing recreational marijuana use landed on Democrat Gov. Tom Wolf's desk, he would likely sign it. Wolf has been pushing for legalization since he took office.