La house committee passes bill to allow medical marijuana prescription



Rep. Ted James, D-Baton Rouge, authored a bill adding medical conditions eligible for medical marijuana, which passed the committee Thursday. | Photo Credit: Sarah Gamard / LSU Manship School News Service

By Kaylee Poche | Posted: Thu 8:47 PM, Apr 05, 2018

BATON ROUGE, La. (LSU Manship School News Service) - A bill that would expand the medical conditions for which doctors could prescribe medical marijuana was passed by a House committee Thursday in an 8-4 vote.

The bill, proposed by Rep. Ted James, D-Baton Rouge, would also allow inhalation of medical marijuana.

The vote followed testimony in the House Health and Welfare Committee from several Louisiana veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

In addition to PTSD, the bill, HB579, would add glaucoma, severe muscle spasms and intractable pain to the list of medical conditions eligible for the state's medical marijuana program.

Existing law allows doctors to prescribe medical marijuana to patients with severe chronic pain such as cancer, epilepsy or Crohn's Disease--those who would typically be prescribed opiates otherwise.

Tony Landry, founder of Louisiana Veterans for Medical Cannabis, said he had several back surgeries after returning from the military and has suffered from chronic pain. After taking opiates, he did not feel like himself, he said.

"It just changed me as a person," Landry said. "It caused me a lot of problems in my relationships. Those veterans in other states who are able to get off opiates get involved in their community."

Jonathan Brown, another member of Louisiana Veterans for Medical Cannabis who served in Baghdad, added: "The wounds of war are not always physical."

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"PTSD is a serious disease that affects veterans across Louisiana," he said, "and they are in desperate need of help."

Among those veterans testifying in support of the bill was Rep. Kenny Cox, D-Natchitoches, who said he has seen how war affects soldiers after they return. He gave a detailed account of young soldiers watching a fellow soldier die and having to bring back his body parts afterward.

"I am a veteran, I have fought, and I've seen how people suffer," Cox said. "It's something that you can't even fathom. It almost takes my breath away."

James said he brought the bill forward to improve current medicinal pot laws to help Louisiana residents currently experiencing chronic pain from conditions not covered by the existing law.

He said the bill could also help solve the state's opioid crisis by allowing doctors to prescribe medical marijuana instead of opioids. Louisiana is one of eight states to have more opioid prescriptions than residents.

"We do have research that says that the more we expand medical marijuana, it leads to a reduction in opioid usage and addiction," James said.

However, Rep. Dodie Horton, R-Haughton, opposed the bill, saying she would rather wait to see the results of the program in the state, since LSU and Southern University are in the process of making medicinal marijuana but have not yet started selling it.

"It amazes me that we're trying to expand a program that hasn't even been operational yet," Horton said. "We don't know if all the illnesses that are listed in the current law, if marijuana will even have the effect on the patients that so desperately need it to."

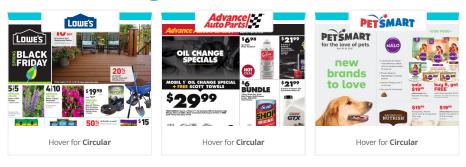
However, James said he thought the bill was long overdue.

"I, for one, am tired of us being 50th for everything positive," James said. "Last year, I spoke to a young lady who had to fly her son out to Colorado. I don't want to force parents to make those decisions. I don't want to force them to do that if we can do something to ease the pain and prolong life here."

Louisiana first passed a law allowing medical marijuana in 1978. However, David Brown of Sensible Marijuana Policy for Louisiana said that the state's medical marijuana program did not classify as "functioning" because it did not already include PTSD patients or allow for inhalation and that he hoped James' bill would change that.

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"Currently, in its form, the medical marijuana law is not workable or sustainable," Brown said. "It contains several poison pills that render it utterly ineffective."

Former Louisiana Senator Anthony Guarisco expressed discontent at what he saw as a lack of progress in the state's medicinal pot program. "We've been waiting and seeing for 40 years," Guarisco exclaimed.

James responded: "I agree that we have moved in baby steps, and I would like to take us further."

Chairman Frank Hoffman, R-West Monroe; Reps. Charles "Bubba" Chaney, R-Rayville; Dodie Horton, R-Haughton; and J. Rogers Pope, R-Denham Springs cast the four votes against the bill.

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