



Louisiana medical marijuana bill signed

Edwards signs medical marijuana expansion bill into law

PUBLISHED: MAY 20, 2016, 5:48 AM • UPDATED: 3 MONTHS AGO

By **Melinda Deslatte**, *The Associated Press*

BATON ROUGE — Katie Corkern couldn't stop smiling Thursday, confident that relief for her son's uncontrollable seizures may finally be near.

Corkern, her son Connor and the rest of her family stood near Gov. John Bel Edwards as he signed a bill to kick-start and expand the Louisiana medical marijuana program, which has been slow to begin because of regulatory hurdles.

"I'm very excited for the future. And I'm very excited for all the people this medicine can help," the mother and advocate said after the bill signing.

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The governor said the program will have a dramatic effect on Louisiana's families.

"It simply is unacceptable to tell parents of kids especially that if they want to make available to their kids the medicine that is being recommended by their doctors in order to achieve some better quality of life, some reduction in pain or other symptoms, that they have to move," Edwards said.

The bill by Republican Sen. Fred Mills, a St. Martin Parish pharmacist, will broaden the existing program to cover more diseases and make regulatory changes aimed at getting marijuana — in an oil form that can't be smoked — into patients' hands more quickly.

Sheriffs and district attorneys opposed the bill as opening the door to eventually legalizing recreational marijuana.

Edwards described the measure as having "tight controls" so it won't become "a medication that is recommended for every ailment that is out there."

Lawmakers sided with parents who said their children's medical conditions could be helped with therapeutic marijuana, who talked of moving to Colorado to lessen their children's suffering and who launched billboards and social media campaigns for the bill.

Corkern and her son, who has a rare brain disorder that causes repeated seizures, were on one of those billboards and were a regular presence around the Louisiana Capitol.

"Connor's neurologist in New Orleans feels (medical marijuana) is the last resort for him in order to control his seizures, because we've obviously tried everything and the meds just aren't working for him. They're making his body waste away," Corkern said.

The Corkerns are from Edwards' hometown of Amite and attend the same church as the governor, and they had a significant advocate on their side — the governor's wife Donna — who attended committee hearings with Katie Corkern and who was on hand for the bill signing.

“In terms of lobbying the governor, nobody did that more effectively than Donna did over the last couple of months,” Edwards said.

The law passed last year will eventually get medicinal-grade pot to people suffering from cancer and a severe form of cerebral palsy. Mills' bill adds seizure disorders, HIV, epilepsy, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis and other diseases to the list.

The bill also sets a Sept. 1 deadline for LSU and Southern University to decide if they want to be the state-sanctioned grower of the product, in an effort to speed the decision-making since the schools get first right of refusal to grow the plant.

It also reworks some of the regulatory language to address doctors' concerns about running afoul of federal drug regulations, allowing a physician to “recommend” use of therapeutic marijuana, rather than prescribe the drug.

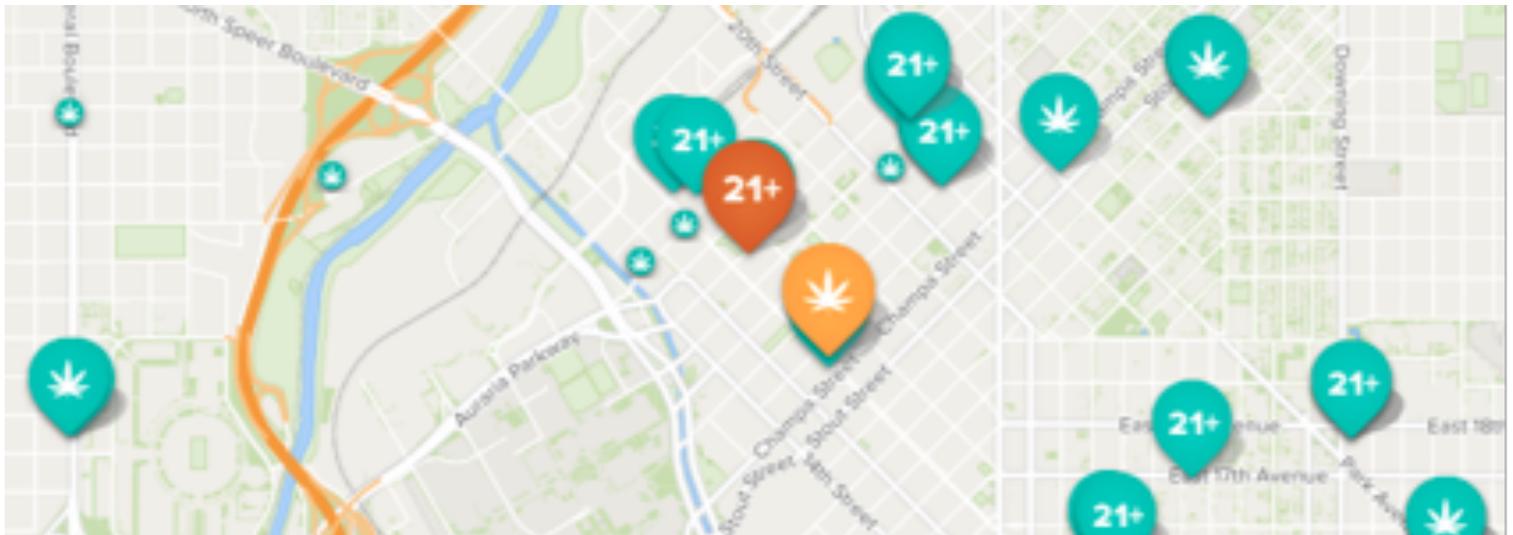
Mills has estimated Louisiana is 18 months to 24 months from getting medical marijuana to patients. The state-sanctioned grower needs to be selected, along with 10 distributors.

Corkern said the wait was now tolerable: “Knowing that I don't have to fight for it to become legal, that makes the waiting easier.”

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