

Spring Legislative Updates: What's Happening with Cannabis Policy in RI

Even if you are actively trying to keep track of cannabis policy here in Rhode Island, it can be difficult to stay up to date with everything that is going on at the State House. What's the deal with the new compassion centers, what are my rights as a medical marijuana patient, and will we ever legalize cannabis for adult use?

So far during this legislative session, the only cannabis legislation that has passed through the House and Senate and became enacted as law is one that includes the now infamous amendment repealing the requirement that the general assembly have final rulemaking authority on any new cannabis regulations. If you recall, this correction was the result of an effort by **House Speaker Mattiello** and **Senate President Ruggiero** to quell the litigious pursuit of **Governor Gina Raimondo**, who did not take kindly to the legislature sneaking language into the law that would grant the general assembly such unchecked regulatory power.

Several other cannabis-related bills have been introduced and are in committee now. Champions of the medical marijuana program **Representative Scott Slater** and **Senator Josh Miller** recently introduced corresponding House and Senate bills (**H-7621** and **S-2544**) that would do a number of things to improve the medical marijuana program, including creating a hardship designation for patients on SSDI/Medicaid, establishing a discount program for low income patients, eliminating the plant tagging system, allowing unlimited compassion center licenses, redefining "debilitating condition" and reducing the compassion center license fee to \$5,000. This legislation comes in response to the **2020 Medical Marijuana Patient Coalition Report**, which outlined the main issues facing medical marijuana patients in Rhode Island (mainly cost and access to medicine), and called upon the House and Senate to put forth legislative solutions. Senator Miller's bill has been referred to the Senate judiciary committee, while the House version will be heard in the House finance committee.

Representatives Anastasia Williams, Scott Slater, Joseph Almeida and **Chris Blazejewski**, among others, have also introduced and co-sponsored several bills relating to criminal justice and cannabis equity that are worthy of supporting. **H-7141** prevents past criminal misdemeanors and felonies for possession of marijuana from disallowing a person from entering the cannabis industry or any government assistance programs. **H-7142** provides automatic expungement to those persons who have previously been convicted of marijuana possession, which would now constitute a decriminalized offense. **H-7635** allows persons with multiple misdemeanors and felonies to seek expungement of up to six convictions, provided that convictions for multiple alcohol related offenses or domestic violence offenses and crime of violence are not eligible. **H-7637** reclassifies certain simple possession as a misdemeanor rather than a felony. All of these criminal justice bills have been referred to the House judiciary committee, with the exception of H-7142, which was held for further study. Criminal record expungement, especially for cannabis possession, is long overdue here in Rhode Island, and it is critical that automatic expungements be made available so that RI residents who were victims of the War on Marijuana are not further burdened with the arduous task of clearing their name.

If you are interested in keeping up with these bills (or any bills moving through the RI legislature), you can sign up for **RI Bill Tracker** on the General Assembly website. Just create a login and password,

choose the bills you'd like to follow and receive email updates when there is movement on any of the legislation you are tracking. This is a super useful tool to help you understand the legislative process more fully, and to learn when to take action on bills that you support. **If you support any of the legislation mentioned here, please contact your legislators to ask them to support these bills, especially if they serve on Finance or Judiciary committees in the House or Senate.** You can also make your voice heard by writing letters to the editor, providing verbal or written testimony to legislative hearings at the State House, volunteering to help advocates who are organizing around these issues, or just talking to your friends and family about what's going on. If you are involved in the cannabis industry, or just want to hear the latest about what's happening within the cannabis space in Rhode Island, you might also consider attending **What's Next for Cannabis in RI**, a public educational event taking place on March 5 from 5:30 - 7:30pm at The Hatch RI (244 Weybosset St). I hope to see you there!