

Marijuana Series: Dear New Jersey Residents Interested in Marijuana Reform: Now Is Your Chance to Speak to Government Officials

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Marijuana reform is a very hot topic in New Jersey. For example, at the end of March, Governor Murphy dramatically expanded the State's medicinal marijuana program, and there are bills pending in the Legislature that would legalize marijuana, decriminalize marijuana, and further alter the State's medicinal marijuana program, to name just a few. While elected officials evaluate whether, and how, to change the State's approach to marijuana, New Jersey residents have several upcoming opportunities to make their voices heard on these issues.

As we have recounted in previous updates, on March 5, the New Jersey Assembly Oversight, Reform and Federal Relations Committee ("Committee") conducted a lengthy hearing before an overflow crowd in order to "receive testimony from invited speakers on the impact of prospective marijuana legislation on the public health, criminal justice system, and economy in New Jersey." As explained by Assemblyman Joe Daniels, the Committee Chairman, the purpose of the hearing was for the Committee to "listen, to be educated, and ask questions of clarification." The Committee has scheduled three additional hearings across the State as part of its Cannabis Listening Tour. The first one is scheduled for this coming Saturday, April 14, at 10:00 a.m. at Middlesex County College. Additional hearings will be held on April 21 at Rowan University and May 12 at Bergen Community College.

Participating in the Assembly Committee's Cannabis Listening Tour is not the only chance that New Jerseyans will have to influence government policy. In that regard, the State's Division of Consumer Affairs ("Division") is currently evaluating how marijuana is classified as a controlled substance under State law, and whether its status should be changed. On April 2, the Division announced that it will solicit public comments on this issue via four public events, or "informal conferences." Two conferences are scheduled for April 19 in Newark at the Division's office, and two are scheduled for The Richard J. Hughes Justice Complex in Trenton on April 24. The first session of each day will run from 9:30 am to 12:30 pm, and the second session from 1:30 pm to 4:30 pm. The conferences will focus on whether marijuana should remain as a Schedule I drug, a category reserved for substances that have a high potential for abuse and no accepted medical uses.

It is difficult to predict what participating New Jerseyans will say at any of these events. One could look to public polling to try to get a sense of the views of New Jerseyans, but a clear picture has yet to emerge. For example, on February 1, Fairleigh Dickinson University released the results of a poll of New Jerseyans that found that 42% of respondents favored legalization; 27% favored the current status whereby medicinal marijuana is legal and recreational use is not; and 26% favored decriminalization. On March 13, Quinnipiac University released a poll that found that New Jersey voters supported adults being able to possess small amounts of marijuana by a margin of 59%-37%. Most recently, Stockton University released a poll of New Jersey residents on April 4 that found that 49% support legalizing marijuana for recreational purposes and 44% oppose legalization, with 5% unsure and 1% volunteering that they favored decriminalization. It will be

interesting to see if the lack of consensus evidenced in these poll results will be reflected in the upcoming hearings, and what impact that may have on governmental officials who are evaluating this issue.