

New Jersey's New Governor Is Moving Fast to Expand Access to Medical Marijuana

Cannabis businesses and entrepreneurs looking for some good news in the wake of Attorney General Jeff Sessions' decision to rescind the Cole Memo can turn their eyes to a huge state that may soon legalize adult-use marijuana.

No, it's not one of those states out West (they've already done it, anyway). It's New Jersey.

The election of Gov. Phil Murphy, a Democrat sworn into office this month, has completely changed the potential for legal marijuana in New Jersey. In his first week in office, he already is making moves to expand the state's medical marijuana program.

In a Jan. 23 Tweet, Murphy wrote:

"Medical marijuana is used to treat chronic and debilitating pain, epilepsy, glaucoma, PTSD, ALS, side effects of cancer treatment, side effects of HIV/AIDS, Crohn's disease, multiple sclerosis, and other painful illnesses. We will not deny people compassionate care any longer."

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What a difference an election makes.

Predictions that New Jersey voters essentially approved legal recreational marijuana when they elected Murphy seem to be coming true. He is the polar opposite of the man he replaced,

Republican Chris Christie, who not only opposed cannabis legalization but once called the idea “beyond stupidity.” Christie went on to rail against the legalization movement in a letter as chairman of President Donald Trump’s commission that is addressing the opioid crisis.

That’s all history, now, at least in the New Jersey governor’s office.

Murphy has said he would make possession and sale of marijuana legal in the Garden State during his campaign. He has pegged the issue to one of fairness, saying that the state incarcerates a higher percentage of minority residents under current law. He reiterated this promise during his inaugural speech.

On the governor’s website, it states that Murphy will “end mass incarceration by pursuing the legalization of marijuana and comprehensively reviewing all criminal sentencing laws.”

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Medical Marijuana Program

Opportunities in the cannabis industry could come quickly. State lawmakers already are working on a bill that will create a legal adult-use cannabis market.

And Murphy has asked for a review of the state’s medical marijuana program, put into place in 2010. In an executive order, Murphy directed the New Jersey Department of Health and the Board of Medical Examiners to review the existing medical marijuana program and “eliminate barriers” to access for patients with conditions that are treatable with medical marijuana.

The state now only allows those with a limited number of conditions to legally use medical marijuana, including multiple sclerosis, terminal cancer and muscular dystrophy.

Murphy also accused Christie of putting up barriers to medical marijuana access, noting that the program has 15,000 enrollees who have access to only five dispensaries in the entire state.

As for who might benefit, in addition to the diseases and conditions listed in his Tweet, Murphy specifically mentioned veterans and the families of children facing terminal illness in his executive order.

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