

Medical marijuana supporters launch new ballot initiative

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SANTA CRUZ — In a cloud of marijuana smoke, Tracy Williams sits in his wheelchair. Between bong hits, he talks about his testimony to the California State Senate.

Williams, 28, is a paraplegic, a pot smoker and a medical marijuana activist.

He and 50 patients and advocates of medical marijuana gathered Saturday in a sweet-smelling downtown Victorian building to celebrate the Santa Cruz Citizens for Medical Marijuana's fourth anniversary and to launch their next battle.

They need 450,000 signatures of registered voters to place the California Compassionate Use Act on the November ballot. The Act would allow doctors to legally prescribe marijuana to chronically ill patients.

The local group began their petition drive with vows to get 100,000 signatures from the Central Coast.

"We are serious and responsible about what we do," said local activist Scott Imler who authored the 1992 county medical marijuana initiative.

But the medical effectiveness of the plant has not been proven, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Williams disagrees. He suffered a spinal cord injury eight years ago in an auto accident and smokes marijuana daily.

"It helps me control these muscle spasms that go non-stop," he said.

In all, 77% of the county voted for Measure A, an advisory ballot measure supporting the use of



Tracy Williams exhales a toke at Saturday's gathering.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

medical marijuana for the chronically ill who had a prescription from their doctors.

Since it passed, county supervisors have sent letters to the state and federal governments advising them of the vote. They also have asked county health services to make information available on the subject and have even asked local law enforcement agencies to use their discretion on patients.

Dr. Tod Mikuriya of Berkeley has researched the medical uses of marijuana for more than 30 years

and was at the gathering Saturday. He used Williams as an example of the positive uses of marijuana.

"It controls chronic pain and spasticity," said Mikuriya, who has published a book on how marijuana helps in the treatment of chronic alcoholism and depression. He said he also has found it stimulates the appetites of AIDS patients and that it reduces post-chemotherapy nausea.

Mikuriya praised the Cannabis Buyers Co-Op. The club is affiliated with Californians for Compas-

sionate Use, which dispenses mostly locally grown marijuana to patients with doctor's prescriptions. Mikuriya called the club a "safe haven."

Senate bill 1364, which allows medical use of marijuana as prescribed by a physician, has passed twice in the State Assembly. Gov. Pete Wilson has vetoed it twice.

If Californians for Compassionate Use can get the necessary signatures, the bill will bypass Wilson and go directly to the statewide general election ballot in November.