

The Trump Administration, Jeff Sessions, and the Future of Medical Marijuana in the United States

The long-standing battle between state medical marijuana reform and federal prohibition is nothing new in this country. Medical marijuana reformers have been fighting this uphill battle for years and making very little progress – until Barack Obama.

When Obama took office in 2009, the medical marijuana community had high hopes for some big changes on medical marijuana laws and policies. Initially, their hope was met with disappointment.

The Obama administration showed a surprising lack of support for medical marijuana reform throughout the president's first term in office. Luckily, Obama's less than progressive stance shifted as he began his second term and a new hope surfaced for those supporting medical marijuana reform in this country.

"I would say that, on the positive side, Obama supported the rights of states to make their own decisions about marijuana policy and appointed people who, for the most part, supported that as well (e.g. Eric Holder and James Cole)," Amanda Reiman, Manager of Marijuana Law and Policy at the Drug Policy Alliance, told The Marijuana Times.

As Obama's presidency came to end, there were mixed feelings on the positive impact that he had on medical marijuana reform. However, with 28 states (and DC) having legalized the use of medical marijuana by the time he left office, it would seem that Obama made some serious strides in medical marijuana reform.

Could Obama have done more to end medical marijuana prohibition in this country?

Sure.

But with our new president's appointment of Jeff Sessions, a well-known anti-drug warrior, as attorney general, there's a good chance that the medical marijuana community will be looking back longingly on the Obama days.

The Trump Administration's Stance on Medical Marijuana

As Donald Trump took office earlier this year, uncertainty for the future of medical marijuana in this country grew exponentially.

Living most of his life in the public eye, Trump has flip-flopped on his stance regarding the use of medical marijuana over the years. Prior to taking office, Trump voiced lukewarm support for state rights on the regulation of medical marijuana.

But as he stepped into the oval, Trump's actions contradicted his seemingly progressive personal viewpoint.

Appointing people like Jeff Sessions and Sean Spicer into his administration, it seems that the Trump administration is planning to take a much more stringent stance on the legalization of medical marijuana than the previous president.

With Sessions and Spicer voicing very public opposition to medical marijuana reform, things are looking bleak for the medical marijuana community.

Simply put, the Trump administration has two main options when it comes to the future of medical marijuana reform – they can aggressively revoke the current state rights and eliminate the \$6.8 billion-dollar medical marijuana industry or continue to support state rights to legislate their individual drug policies.

So, which path will Trump and his administration choose?

As of now, it's not one-hundred percent clear. Although nothing 'official' has been decided or put into action by the Trump administration yet, the administration as a whole has hinted at a crackdown on medical marijuana policies.

Statements like this one made by White House press secretary Sean Spicer last month, when he said that he believed the administration would push "greater enforcement" of federal drug laws, under which marijuana is still a banned substance, have undoubtedly left the medical marijuana community feeling uneasy.

Jeff Sessions vs. Medical Marijuana Reform

The medical marijuana community heaved a collective sigh of disappointment when Trump appointed Jeff Sessions as attorney general.

Why?

Because Sessions has a reputation for being one of the most outspoken anti-drug crusaders out there. Throughout his political career, he's made no secret about his strong opposition to the use of marijuana – both recreationally and medicinally.

Recently, Sessions has upped his anti-war game and seriously upset the medical marijuana community by claiming that the use of medical marijuana "has been hyped too much" and that he "rejects the idea that America will be a better place if marijuana is sold in every corner store." And let's not forget his comment claiming that, "good people don't use marijuana."

But sadly, those comments are just the tip of Sessions' anti-drug iceberg.

As if the medical marijuana community wasn't cringing enough already, he really hit a nerve when he was quoted as saying, "And I am astonished to hear people suggest that we can solve our heroin crisis by legalizing marijuana - so people can trade one life-wrecking dependency for another that's only slightly less awful. Our nation needs to say clearly once again that using drugs will destroy your life."

It goes without saying that Jeff Sessions is no friend of the medical marijuana community and will undoubtedly throw a wrench in the progress that has been made for medical marijuana reform in recent years.

Public Reaction to the Trump Administration & Jeff Sessions

With support for the legalization of medical marijuana – and marijuana in general – reaching an all-time high in this country in 2016, it's no surprise that Trump and his administration's standpoint on marijuana has been met with extreme backlash from the public.

Jeff Sessions' comments intimating that marijuana will destroy your life or that it is only slightly less awful than heroin have been met with great hostility by a variety of medical marijuana supporters.

Dr. Donald Abrams, a University of California-based professor of clinical medicine, has studied the numerous health effects of marijuana and claims that it is preposterous for anybody to allege that marijuana is hazardous to a person's health.

Abrams says, "I have been a physician for about 40 years and I have never admitted a patient for any complications arising from cannabis use," the doctor said. "The number of patients having problems with alcohol use, heroin use, and methamphetamine use is enormous. Jeff Sessions' statement is uninformed and unfortunate."

And members of the scientific community are not the only ones offended and appalled by Sessions' seemingly ignorant comments.

Dustin Chandler, a resident of Hoover and father to Carly, a girl born with a neurological disorder, was less than amused with Sessions' viewpoint. His daughter's neurological disorder moved the Alabama state legislature to pass Carly's Law in 2014, permitting patients who suffer with issues similar to his daughters' the ability to access and use cannabidiol oil.

Chandler disagreed with Sessions' comments saying, "It (medical marijuana) is not overhyped."

He went on to extend an invitation to the attorney general to visit his home and witness the huge transformation that medical marijuana has had on his daughter. Prior to the passing of Carly's law, Chandler struggled to connect and form a meaningful relationship with his daughter.

But with the use of cannabidiol oil, Chandler has a new-found relationship with Carly and has watched her life improve significantly. She now has improved cognitive abilities and far fewer seizures, all thanks to the use of medical marijuana in the form of cannabidiol oil.

Of the sixty percent of Americans surveyed last year by the Gallup poll that favor outright legalization of marijuana, there's no doubt that Dr. Donald Abrams and Dustin Chandler are not the only ones who were seriously offended by Sessions' narrow stance on medical marijuana reform.

Trump, Sessions, and the rest of the presidential administration has the entire medical marijuana community nervously wondering, what does the future of medical marijuana look like in this country?

What Does the Future of Medical Marijuana Look Like?

For a brief moment during and after his confirmation hearings, Jeff Sessions appeared to have mellowed on his opposition towards medical marijuana. This gave the medical marijuana community hope that Sessions, and the Trump administration in general, might not be as detrimental to medical marijuana reform as previously thought.

Prior to being sworn into the Attorney General position, Sessions appeared to be less emphatic on the crackdown of marijuana and was quoted as saying that he'd simply need to use 'good judgment' when choosing how to enforce the federal cannabis laws if he were to be made Attorney General.

In fact, Sessions toned down in his marijuana antipathy so much that the Marijuana Policy Project, a pro-legalization advocacy group, issued a statement via Robert Capecchi, the Director of Federal Policies, indicating that the group was cautiously optimistic about Sessions' and the Trump administration's intentions concerning marijuana. The group was pleasantly surprised that when Sessions was granted an opportunity to 'take an extreme prohibitionist approach', he passed on it.

But their hope didn't last long.

Fast forward to present day and that hope for a more mellow stance on medical marijuana policies has been squashed with Sessions' recent comments in which he reiterated his hardline approach to medical marijuana reform.

In light of these comments, supporters of medical marijuana reform are desperately clinging to comments made by President Trump during his campaign, when he vowed to leave regulation up to the states.

Amanda Reiman, Manager of Marijuana Law and Policy at the Drug Policy Alliance, remains unsure on the future of medical marijuana but is, nonetheless, hoping for the best, "His (Obama's) criminal justice reform agenda moved us forward on the issue, but lacked any true protection against the incoming administration in terms of losing ground and reverting back to a 1980's style drug war. We can only hope that the gains we made under Obama will be enough to maintain our victories in the coming years."

With so much uncertainty surrounding how the Trump administration will handle medical marijuana reform, it's a precarious time for the medical marijuana community. We can only hope that our current president will not destroy the progress that has been made and listen to people like Tom Angell, chairman of pro-legalization group Marijuana Majority.

Angell told Business Insider in November that the new administration should recognize a "crackdown against broadly popular laws in a growing number of states would create huge political problems they don't need."

Resources:

<https://www.marijuanatimes.org/president-obamas-legacy-on-marijuana-a-tale-of-two-terms/>

http://www.al.com/news/index.ssf/2017/03/jeff_sessions_medical_marijuan.html

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-trump-administrations-nonsensical-stance-on-marijuana/2017/02/27/b5aab714-fd07-11e6-8f41-ea6ed597e4ca_story.html?utm_term=.1ec00585544e

https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/jeff-sessions-medical-marijuana-has-been-hyped-maybe-too-much/2017/03/15/2a15bb1a-0999-11e7-93dc-00f9bdd74ed1_story.html?utm_term=.47f8852e3011

<http://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/321639-confusion-mounts-over-trump-administrations-stance-on-marijuana>

<http://www.businessinsider.com/trump-on-marijuana-legalization-2017-1>