Poll: Medical marijuana gets strong support upstate

By Cara Matthews • clmatthe@gannett.com • July 14, 2010, 6:50 pm

ALBANY -- A poll released Wednesday by the Cornell University Survey Research Institute found that nearly two-thirds of New Yorkers favor legalizing marijuana for medical use.

A higher percentage of upstate residents support it than people who live downstate (which includes New York City, the northern suburbs and Long Island) -- 67 percent versus 62 percent.

"It pretty much said what we've seen in polls across the state and across the country for many years, which is that people strongly support medical marijuana," said Vince Marrone, a lobbyist for the Marijuana Policy Project, which favors the legalization of medical marijuana.

There is a marked difference in attitude between Democrats and unaffiliated voters on one side and Republicans on the other, according to the poll. Sixty-six percent of Democrats and 68 percent of unaffiliated voters support legalization for medical use, while a plurality of Republicans -- 48 percent -- said they are against it.

Conservative Party Chairman Michael Long said there is no evidence that marijuana helps with any medical conditions, and the party opposes legalization for medical use.

"There have been some leaders who ... have pushed to have us change our position, but the majority of the leadership rejects the thought process that in some way shape or form it helps people," he said.

The poll found that 79 percent of people who consider themselves ideologically liberal support medical marijuana, compared to 63 percent for self-identified moderates and 49 percent for conservatives.

More men are in favor of medical marijuana than women -- 67 percent versus 61 percent, the poll said. The higher the household income, the more likely the support for legalization -- 53 percent for people with household incomes below $30,000 compared to 73 percent for those with incomes of $100,000 or more, the Survey Research Institute said.

The 2010 Empire State Poll surveyed New Yorkers on a number of issues facing their community and the state. More than 800 telephone interviews were conducted in February and March.

Legislation to legalize medical marijuana didn’t get through the Senate or Assembly this year. It would have allowed patients registered with the state Department of Health to have up to 2.5 ounces of marijuana on hand at any one time. It could not be smoked in public places. The state would register organizations that would acquire, manufacture, sell, deliver, transport and distribute marijuana for medical use.

Bills on the topic have been introduced for more than a dozen years. The Assembly has passed legislation twice before. Neither house brought the bill to the floor for a vote this year.

"We don't consider it over with yet," Marrone said. "There's still a lot of interest in both houses and the governor's office to do this."

Fourteen other states allow the use of marijuana for patients who have serious or life-threatening medical conditions, such as HIV/AIDS and multiple sclerosis. Users have said it relieves nausea and reduces chronic pain and muscle spasms.
Cornell's Survey Research Institute has been conducting an annual Empire State Poll since 2003. The margin of error is plus or minus 3.5 percent.

In a February Quinnipiac University poll, 71 percent of New York voters said legalizing marijuana for medical use was a good idea and 25 percent said it was not. The political breakdown of those supporting it was 78 percent of Democrats, 55 percent of Republicans and 73 percent of independents.