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Elected officials say it's time for Illinois to move toward legalizing marijuana

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Cook County commissioner John Fritchey wants Illinois officials to start creating a regulatory framework for legalizing marijuana.

Legalize it.

At the very least, start taking steps toward legalizing it.

That's the message that a group of county and state elected officials plan to deliver at a press conference downtown Monday afternoon. They'll point to both the costs of enforcing current marijuana laws and the potential financial benefits of legalizing pot for recreational use.

It's the latest sign that [the politics of pot](#) are shifting at a pace that was unimaginable even a couple of years ago.

"It is well past time to recognize that the so-called 'war on drugs' has been a misguided failure with respect to marijuana laws and policies," Cook County commissioner John Fritchey, who's leading the effort, said in a

written statement. "The Illinois Legislature should follow the successful lead of other states and start taking meaningful steps toward a workable framework to allow the responsible sale and use of cannabis."

The elected officials plan to call for the creation of a state task force to research potential regulations, project revenues, and propose legislation for the sale and taxation of legal pot. Experts in law enforcement, health care, and business would be involved.

The announcement is clearly meant to prod leaders in Springfield. In February state reps Robyn Gabel of Evanston and Sara Feigenholtz of Chicago introduced a bill calling for a study of marijuana legalization. It's been sitting in the house rules committee ever since.

Illinois politicians tend to move at a glacial pace on changing drug and criminal justice policies, even when they're clearly broken. But the national debate on marijuana regulation has moved dramatically.

Colorado state officials caught the attention of cash-strapped states around the country when they announced total tax revenues of more than \$6 million from the first two months of state-regulated marijuana sales there.

In [an interview with the *New Yorker*](#) published in January, President Obama said he believed marijuana was less harmful than alcohol and indicated his support for legalization in Colorado and Washington as test cases. "It's important for it to go forward because it's important for society not to have a situation in which a large portion of people have at one time or another broken the law and only a select few get punished," he said.

But that's exactly what's happened. [A report released last year by the ACLU](#) found that a racial gap in low-level pot arrests exists nationwide, "in all regions of the country, in counties large and small, urban and rural, wealthy and poor, and with large and small Black populations."

Chicago has one of the largest grass gaps in the country, even after efforts to address it.

Two-and-a-half years ago Fritchey and a group of aldermen held a press conference [to call for easing marijuana penalties](#) in Chicago and Cook

County. [That led to a new city ordinance](#) allowing police to issue tickets for low-level pot possession instead of making arrests for it.

In the time since, though, pot has essentially been decriminalized in some parts of town [while in others it's still punishable by arrest and lockup](#). While the overall rate of marijuana busts has dropped, police still make 44 arrests for low-level possession a day, and almost eight of every ten involve African-Americans. Misdemeanor marijuana possession is the leading arrest category in Chicago by a long shot, costing at least 46,000 police hours and \$23 million in the city alone last year.

The ACLU study found that Illinois was spending more than \$200 million annually on low-level pot busts.

Some state legislators have taken notice. At least three bills have been introduced in the house this year that would ease penalties for marijuana possession across Illinois, though none has gained traction.

Meanwhile, state regulators are moving slowly and cautiously toward setting up a [medical marijuana program](#) that was authorized to start at the beginning of this year. Advocates stress that the medical program is meant to help seriously ill patients, but it's also widely viewed as a pilot program for legalizing recreational marijuana.

Several Chicago aldermen have also vowed to get the City Council to look into legalization. "I think there's broad public support for it," says 1st Ward alderman Proco Joe Moreno.

What's clear is that it's now considered a smart, progressive political move to call for marijuana reforms, even if they don't advance. Fifty-eight percent of Americans back legalizing marijuana, the largest share ever recorded, according to an October Gallup poll.

Officials believe the figure is much higher in the Chicago area.