

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Medical Marijuana Advocates Picket Governor Mapp At Juan Luis Hospital

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Ernice Gilbert **May 09, 2015**



ST. CROIX -- A few people, among them two physicians, stationed themselves at the Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center advocating for medical marijuana. They said it was ludicrous that the Virgin Islands legislative body has taken no action on legalizing medical cannabis, which has seen widespread adaptation across the U.S.

"People have been misinformed for multiple generations, and we're here for the patients. Marijuana really works -- it used to be a medicine prior to 1937. All the major pharmaceuticals were selling it; they derived medicine from the marijuana plant, and all I want to see is that it comes back again," said Alfeo Barone, who lead today's small movement.

"We need to have a choice. Like I always say, if our votes were good enough to get you elected, our vote is good enough to make a law," he added.

The group of five, which later expanded to six, told *VI Consortium* that they chose the hospital because Governor Kenneth Mapp was scheduled to be the guest of honor at an AARP meeting at the Cardiac Center.

"We are hoping that he would meet with us," Barone said, "we would love to meet with him." Barone said the group wanted to show the governor that "there are people here in the Virgin Islands who would like to see medical marijuana become an option. And it's not to say that this is the only thing that's going to be allowed, we just want an option, a little freedom."

Manuel Damotta, a chiropractor by training, said marijuana "is the safest drug in the world," and he joined the group to help people realize that "the stigma for using cannabis and marijuana should be gone."

"This thing works for patients and they should have the choice and option to have this as



Medical marijuana advocates picket outside of

the Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center's middle entrance

Damotta added that the drug has no side effects, but contrary to his assertions, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, marijuana has a range of side effects, both short and long term.

Some short term effects include "altered senses (for example, seeing brighter colors) altered sense of time, changes in mood, impaired body movement, difficulty with thinking and problem-solving and impaired memory," [according to the institute](#).

As for long term effects, the institute says marijuana affects brain development, and that "when marijuana users begin using as teenagers, the drug may reduce thinking, memory, and learning functions and affect how the brain builds connections between the areas necessary for these functions."

This falls in line with what Sen. Kurt Vialet [said](#) during the 2014 General Election season.

"I in no way agree with the legalization [of marijuana] at all," he said. "I don't agree with it because I have seen the effect on our young population. We're losing a lot of our young males and females because of marijuana."

Vialet's strong opposition to the legalization of the drug stems from his experiences as an educator. He pointed out that he has seen students arrive at school in the mornings "stoned" due to marijuana use and saw how the drug destroyed others, who at first, came with a great deal of potential.

"On the junior high school level, I had students coming school in 7th grade literally stoned in the morning," he said. "You could literally see the changes."

Vialet went on to share his observations during his time as a high school administrator.

"When I was at Complex, I saw students who came in 9th grade, such nice students [and] you just look at them and you're like, 'Oh, wow', and you see them three years after and you're like, 'What's really going on? What happened to that person?' But, they were just consistently using marijuana," he said.

But the picketers at the hospital today were not seeking outright legalization of marijuana; just the medical use of it.

Dr. Carmen Cintron, who once practiced at JFL, said the Virgin Islands needed to "catch up with the rest of the world" on medical marijuana. She applauded Sen. Terrence "Positive" Nelson for his efforts and expressed frustration that his colleagues hadn't demonstrated the kind of support that would get a bill through.

On Governor Mapp, Cintron said she likes that the territory's leader "thinks outside the box," and was confident that if a bill arrived at his desk, it would be signed into law.

Before the interview with Cintron could be over, however, Dr. Ken Okolo, PhD, JFL's new chief operating officer, told the group to leave the hospital's premises because it was "private" property and the hospital did not want to give the impression that it was in support of the group's efforts. Okolo later clarified to *VI Consortium* that JFL is in a public-private partnership with the government, but that it retains its independence.

The group moved just outside the hospital's middle entrance, still waiting for the governor to arrive, and minutes later, he did.

The six advocates ran towards the incoming motorcade so Mapp could see the signs they were holding up. To their utter surprise, the motorcade stopped and the governor stepped out.

The territory's chief executive courteously greeted the small group and said he hoped their legislators (members of the 31st Legislature) were supporting their efforts by crafting a medical marijuana bill for his consideration.

Cintron told the governor she heard that he had some concerns about the medicinal use of the drug.

"I have my [general concerns](#) but when the bill comes that is something we will look at," he said. The bill, Mapp added, "is not for me to deal with; that's for the senate to deal with."

When asked if an executive order could be issued, the governor said, "it doesn't work that way."

"You already hear many of the questions that are being asked in Puerto Rico in terms of so many issues on restrictions, providers, cleanliness and we can't address those issues in an executive order," Mapp said.

He added: "I don't believe that the law permits me to enact such a measure just simply by the stroke of my pen. Executive orders are generally edicts that are applicable to the executive branch."

VI Consortium asked the governor if he'd be inclined to sign the measure if it arrived at his desk.

"I will look at the measure," he said. "You can't be inclined to sign what you don't know. It's like me saying to you, 'would you sign your next prenuptial agreement.' You don't know what's in it."

With that, the governor left for his meeting and the picketers eventually went their separate ways.