The Maine Event

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It’s a big state with a small population—just over a million people, including 1,300 HIVers—but in February, Maine became the first in the union to receive a federal waiver allowing Medicaid coverage of asymptomatic HIVers, including those without an AIDS diagnosis. And in another plus for HIVers, a state senator proposed in March that marijuana confiscated during drug arrests should be redistributed for medicinal use.

Is it something in the water? Cumberland County Sheriff Mark Dion, who also supported the state’s med-pot initiative that passed last fall with 61 percent voter approval, went on the record in favor of the proposal that would funnel marijuana nabbed by the state Drug Enforcement Agency to registered patients. “I must advocate for social justice when the law fails to meet the needs of its citizens,” he said. The careful end run would allow Maine to avoid federal laws forbidding drug purchase.

And even local politicos were persuaded by the push to expand Medicaid: “It is less expensive for the state to pay for preventative measures that control HIV than it is to wait for the disease to progress,” said Maine’s Angus King, one of only two independent U.S. governors.

Other states have applied for Medicaid waivers and are waiting for a decision from the feds—but at least one AIDS advocate isn’t convinced this is the best way to expand benefits packages for HIVers. “There’s a requirement that there be no new costs in the program,” said Tom McCormack, of a technical assistance group. That means that instead of getting more money for Medicaid, Mainers have to show they won’t be spending any more than they had already planned to shell out. That catch may call for painstaking checkbook balancing.

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