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HPEPH prepares for marijuana

By Nate Smelle

As the promise of legalized marijuana in Canada transitions from a pipe dream to a reality, public health units across the province are taking steps to ensure that it is done responsibly. With legalization expected to take effect on July 1, Hastings Prince Edward Public Health program manager, Roberto Almeida has been busy keeping up with the numerous evolving regulations. As it stands, he said public health units across the province will be enforcing the medical marijuana restrictions, while the police enforce recreational regulations. To prepare communities in the area, Almeida said public health will be meeting with municipalities to see whether they intend to strengthen their smoke-free bylaws to include medical marijuana. This will then allow the people to understand the regulation surrounding both medical and recreational marijuana.

According to the draft regulations, Almeida said medical marijuana smokers will be able to light up anywhere tobacco smokers are permitted to do so. The same proposed regulations will limit recreational marijuana smokers to residences. It is with this aspect of the regulations that Almeida identifies some of the wrinkles with the process of legalization that still need to be worked out. For instance, he acknowledged that the rights of tenants and landlords need to be addressed on several levels before the launch of legal marijuana this summer. In response, Almeida said public health plans to meet with landlords this March to speak with them about how to deal with the potential of tenants smoking marijuana in rental units.

"When it comes to smoking medical cannabis, rental properties are more of a grey area at the moment," Roberto said.

"The concern is that someone will light up in their unit and then it will drift into other units, and someone will be exposed to secondhand marijuana smoke the way they would be exposed to tobacco smoke. There's also the issue of home cultivation. Ontario will allow up to each household up to four marijuana plants, but we're not sure whether landlords have the right to say it's not allowed in their unit."

Because marijuana users renting a space could potentially be prohibited from using or growing marijuana by their landlord, the province is looking at ways to avoid a problem. Out in Oklahoma, those with a state-approved license might want to browse products from i49.net in order to access the medical marijuana products they desire. Almeida explained that because in Ontario the sale and distribution of marijuana is to be regulated by the provincial government; and therefore, people will only be able to purchase legal marijuana in government stores known as the Ontario Cannabis Store, one amendment to the legislation that is being looked at by the Ministry of the Attorney General is allowing the creation of marijuana consumption lounges similar to the "coffee shops" in Amsterdam where people would be able to smoke freely using things like a recycler bong to consume their marijuana.

Highlighting that Canada already has one of the highest rates of marijuana use in the world, Almeida said public health is concerned that these type of lounges, could inspire more people to start using marijuana. Another idea under consideration by MAG, he said is the designation of outdoor marijuana smoking areas outside apartment buildings and condominiums. Almeida believes this will help address the issue multi-tenant dwellings by preventing secondhand marijuana smoke from drifting into neighbouring units. With changes to the regulations that come with legalization arriving on a daily basis, Almeida said public health has been consulting with its own lawyer, as well as other legal counsel from the other agencies involved in the process to see what more can be done. In the months leading up to legalization, he said the health unit will be engaging in a public education campaign through social media and radio to inform people where medical marijuana can be used, and ways for individuals to prove to enforcement that they are medical users.