

Illinois expands medical marijuana program to combat opioid epidemic

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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SPRINGFIELD – Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner has approved an extension to Illinois's medical marijuana pilot program.

The extension would allow people who would have otherwise been prescribed opioids to opt instead for a medical cannabis card, which would allow them to utilize cannabis instead of opioids for treatment. Under this new extension, mandatory fingerprinting and background checks will no longer be required for Illinois's medical cannabis patients to receive their cards.

This measure from Rauner, who has previously been rather outspoken against cannabis legalization, is in response to the opioid epidemic, which claimed around 72,000 lives nationwide in 2017 with as many as 2,000 of those being in Illinois. As of a few weeks ago, Fentanyl – an extremely powerful opioid, which has seemingly replaced heroin in Madison County overdose deaths – has claimed as many as 31 lives in Madison County alone.

Assistant Director for the Illinois Chapter of the National Organization for Reform of Marijuana Law (NORML) Ali Nagib said the extension, which is expected to be signed into law Tuesday by Rauner, is something his group has been working to see for a long time after Illinois rolled out its medical marijuana pilot program in 2013.

“We've been working for a long time on this, along with other bills with decriminalization and legalizing industrial hemp,” he said. “We are also pushing for the passing of adult use bills currently entering the Illinois General Assembly. We focus on reforms for existing marijuana laws, and this extension also removed fingerprinting and background checks from the program, so those will no longer be a reason to deny people medicine in Illinois.”

According to an NPR article from April 2018, researchers from the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, said “good evidence” exists regarding the decrease of opioid usage in states with legal cannabis dispensaries. In fact, Medicare recipients in these states decreased an average of 1.8 million fewer opioid doses taken a day in states allowing homegrown marijuana usage for medical purposes and 3.7 million fewer for dispensary programs.



Nagib said data in Illinois would back these claims, but said Illinois's pilot program only has around 40,000 patients in a state with a population exceeding 12 million. Similar programs in states with smaller populations such as Colorado had hundreds of thousands entering them. Nagib also said people wait upwards of 90 days for their Illinois medical marijuana card, despite waits claimed to take only as long as 45 days. He said this new extension should alleviate some of those existing issues.

As of now, Illinois's program is one of the most difficult medical marijuana programs in regards to qualifications. Many states have a wider berth for mental health issues, whereas Illinois's program is more related to debilitating physical issues, with a notable exception for sufferers of PTSD.

“There are still many people who don't have access who should have access to this medicine,” Nagib said. “A lot of steps have been taken as time has passed, but we need to change these laws. We need to decriminalize this and stop denying access to sick people. Mental health conditions are also not usually eligible for marijuana usage, and even this opioid expansion will not help everybody. Hopefully this program can continue to expand and extend.”

Currently, Illinois's pilot medical marijuana program is set to expire in 2020. Rauner has voiced opposition several times against recreational adult usage, but his opponent in the November election, J.B. Pritzker, has voiced support for legalization. Nagib said NORML Illinois will work with whatever situation they are given this November both in the governor's seat and the overall climate of the Illinois General Assembly.

It should be noted the amount of deaths directly related to specifically marijuana usage on its own – not taking into account intoxicated driving or other accidents occurring while under the influence of cannabis – stands and has always stood at zero.