

# Illinois Expands Medical Marijuana Program in Response to Opioid Crisis

## Cannabis Business Legal News

By Michael McGrory on August 29, 2019

Spurred by the opioid crisis, Illinois expanded its medical marijuana program to make it easier for patients to obtain registration cards, and to allow patients suffering from conditions that have traditionally been treated with opioids to obtain medical cannabis as an alternative.

This week, Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner—who is generally thought to be hostile to the state's medical marijuana program—signed into law the Alternative to Opioids Act of 2018. This legislation eliminates the requirement that patients and caregivers undergo a criminal background and fingerprint check in order to obtain registration cards, as well as the prior rule that disqualified patients who had been convicted of certain criminal offenses.

The legislation also creates a new category of patient who can obtain medical cannabis. The list of about 40 debilitating conditions for which medical cannabis is allowed remains in effect. Under the new legislation, patients who suffer from “a medical condition for which an opioid has been or could be prescribed by a physician based on generally accepted standards of care” can participate in the Opioid Alternative Pilot Program. Opioid patients must be 21 years or older, and are entitled to 2.5 ounces of cannabis per 14-day period.

The new law makes a number of other important changes. Patients may now obtain a “provisional registration” that will allow a patient to purchase medical cannabis while awaiting the state's decision on registration. It also permits certifying physicians to notify regulators if a registered patient no longer suffers from a debilitating condition, if the bona fide physician-patient relationship was terminated, or if the patient's continued use of medical cannabis would result in contraindication with the patient's other medication. In addition, this week's legislation makes it a misdemeanor to charge a fee for assisting a patient with a medical cannabis application.

Illinois' medical cannabis program is still technically a pilot program, and is still slated to expire on June 30, 2020. And while the new laws go into effect immediately, from a practical perspective, there will be no changes until regulators determine the rules to implement the new law. Nevertheless, the Alternative to Opioids Act could prove to be a game changer for Illinois' medical

cannabis industry, which is still struggling in many ways.

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