

Access is central to Maryland medical marijuana program

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Plenty of states have rolled out medical marijuana operations before Maryland, but as the state prepares to announce its top candidates for licenses to grow and process the drug, it's determined not to repeat the mistakes of others.

Maryland takes one of the more liberal approaches toward medical marijuana access, and that's caught the notice of businesses that flooded regulators with more than 1,000 applications.

"It's failed in other states because they've been too restrictive about the kinds of diseases and ailments that could be utilized by physicians, and I think in Maryland they've taken the opposite approach, which generates the interest because they appreciate that Maryland is forward thinking on this," said Gerard Evans, a lobbyist for license applicant Holistic Industries.

Medical marijuana will be available for any condition that is severe in which other medical treatments have been ineffective, and if the symptoms "reasonably can be expected to be relieved" by marijuana. Patients with a chronic or debilitating medical condition that causes severe appetite loss, severe or chronic pain, severe nausea, seizures or severe muscle spasms also can have access, as well as people with glaucoma or post-traumatic stress disorder.

Even further, Maryland will allow not only physicians but nurse practitioners, dentists, podiatrists and nurse midwives to certify patients

as eligible to receive marijuana.

"It's not only the broad spectrum of conditions and ailments that they've put out there, but also the broad spectrum of health care practitioners that can recommend it," said Angeline Nanni, CEO of CannaMED Pharmaceuticals, which has applied for a grower's license in Hebron on Maryland's Eastern Shore where the company already has invested about \$1 million in a facility to grow and research marijuana.

Regulators have adopted best-industry practices for marijuana concentrates and cannabis-infused products. They also have implemented strict regulations regarding bona fide physician-patient relationships.

People authorized to recommend marijuana use will be able to do so for patients in other states who come to Maryland.

Twenty-five states and the District of Columbia have legalized a comprehensive medical marijuana program, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. In Maryland, regulators are scheduled to announce on Monday which companies have received preliminary approval for licenses to grow or process marijuana.

The industry has struggled in some states. For example, Minnesota's two licensed medical marijuana manufacturers each posted millions of dollars in losses in their first year of operations, according to financial documents obtained by The Associated Press. Minnesota's program is only open to patients with 10 severe conditions.

Maryland approved its first medical marijuana law in 2013. The effort stalled, however, because it required academic medical centers to run the programs, and none stepped forward.

The law was changed in 2014 to allow doctors certified by the Maryland Medical Cannabis Commission to recommend marijuana for patients with debilitating, chronic and severe illnesses.

Medical cannabis is not expected to be available from Maryland dispensaries until sometime next year. The commission is expected to grant 94 dispensary licenses from 811 applicants later this year.

Troy Dayton of the San Francisco-based Arcview Group said interest in Maryland also is driven by the potential for full legalization later. Four states—Alaska, Colorado, Oregon and Washington, as well as the District of Columbia—allow marijuana possession in small amounts by adults over 21 for any reason. Medical and recreational marijuana sales in Colorado reached nearly \$1 billion last year.

"Part of the reason I think why a lot of people want to get these licenses now is that they imagine that adult-use legalization will come sometime, and they will already have a brand and a market and customers and really have an advantage if the market shifts in Maryland," Dayton said.

For now, though, officials say the focus is on helping sick people, including children who meet their physician's criteria for treatment.

Harry "Buddy" Robshaw, the vice chairman of the commission, spent more than 40 years as a policeman, 15 of them as a narcotics investigator who used to put people in jail for using drugs.

"I have come to believe very strongly, though, that [medical marijuana](#) is going to be a savior for a lot of people in the state of Maryland, particularly kids," Robshaw said at a recent meeting this month.

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