

Researching medical marijuana for veterans faces more White House hurdles

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As scientists try to research the medical benefits of marijuana, a simple problem has emerged: How do you research marijuana if no one can produce it under federal law?

Despite a solution proposed in mid-2016, which allowed the Drug Enforcement Administration to approve marijuana manufacturers, only the University of Mississippi has been approved, despite dozens of applications. And there's no sign the DEA intends to approve others anytime soon.

Advocates seem to blame one person for the delays: Attorney General Jeff Sessions. Ian Prior, spokesman for the Justice Department, declined to comment on the issue.

"The holdup is the Department of Justice," said Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla.

Congress is trying to take action to get the process moving.

A House committee recently approved a bipartisan bill authored by Rep. Luis Correa, D-Calif. It pushes the Department of Veterans Affairs to research marijuana's ability to treat [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) and other chronic pain.

Correa found many veterans already use marijuana as an alternative to highly addictive opioids.

Correa said the VA is already authorized to research cannabis under [federal law](#), but when he asked the agency about its policies, officials said it had that authority.

"Cannabis is good for treating epilepsy, seizures—it is well-documented, we know it works. The question is what else does it work for?" Correa said.

"For us to stick our heads in a hole in the ground, and not research the medical aspects of this—it's criminal," he said. "Absolutely criminal."

Even in places where medical or [recreational marijuana](#) is legal at the state level, the VA has to comply with federal law and therefore cannot prescribe cannabis for medical purposes.

If the bill can pass Congress—unlikely in an election year, but not impossible since it has support from members of both parties—increasing future demand on medical marijuana research and the limitations of only having one manufacturer could severely limit research capabilities.

Gaetz introduced legislation in April that would force the [attorney general](#) to approve a certain number of cannabis manufacturers per year. It has 30 cosponsors, including Rep. Bob Goodlatte, R-Va., House Judiciary Committee chairman, a sign the legislation has a chance of at least making it to the House floor.

In the Senate, Kamala Harris, D-Calif., and Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, sent a letter to Sessions a month ago asking why the applications at the DEA have stalled, with a Tuesday deadline for response. At least 25 manufacturers have applied, according to the letter, and none have been approved.

Prior said Thursday that officials "plan on responding in as expeditious a manner as possible." He did not respond to a follow-up question on if they thought they would respond by the deadline or ask for an extension.

Hatch and Harris mentioned concerns over veterans in that letter, and also warned that Senate legislation may be forthcoming to force the consideration of more manufacturers.

"Ninety-two percent of veterans support federal research on marijuana, and the Department of Veterans Affairs is aware that many veterans have been using marijuana to manage the pain of their wartime wounds," they wrote.

An official for the National Institute on Drug Abuse, which works with the University of Mississippi in distributing marijuana for research purposes, said current inventory is "more than sufficient" for current needs. And while the agency said there hasn't been a major increase in demand for marijuana in recent years, there has been "emerging interest from the research community for a wider variety of marijuana and [marijuana products](#)."

The NIDA official said it's difficult to make sure certain strains are available at certain times, but the University of Mississippi does have a wide variety of plants available to researchers. NIDA does support increasing the number of manufacturers to "increase the variety and strains available to scientists."

There were 354 individuals and institutions approved by the DEA to conduct research on marijuana and its related components as of Aug. 11, 2016, the most recent data available. The University of Mississippi is the only manufacturer available to legally produce marijuana for those researchers.

The university can produce over 500 kilograms of [marijuana](#) in an outdoor growing season, and about 10 kilograms during indoor seasons, according to the university website.

He said many veterans in places like California, where marijuana is legal for recreational use, are self-medicating using strains they can find in dispensaries, which are not necessarily the strains the University of Mississippi is producing for research.

"If you ask the University of Mississippi all the cannabis shops they sell to—it's zero," the congressman said. "It's just good scientific practice. We need to test the stuff that people are using to medicate."

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