

# In Illinois, medical marijuana can now replace opioids

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An old photo popped up on Tashena Altman's Facebook profile recently, showing her a memory from three years ago.

"I had maybe 15 pill bottles in the picture, just to do my daily life," said Altman, who has pain from sickle cell anemia.

Altman, 31, has been using marijuana bought on the black market to wean her off the pills, many of them opioids. With two children, one of whom is disabled, she can't afford to be in a fog from painkillers. The marijuana has helped—she takes only vitamins daily now, and her hospital visits have become less frequent.

Illinois' new Opioid Alternative Pilot Program allows those prescribed opioids to access medical marijuana. Previously, patients had to have one of about 40 qualifying conditions, such as cancer or AIDS, to use the drug.

Altman was one of the first patients to buy medical marijuana through the new program.

"I can't get in trouble for this. It feels really good to do this the right way," she said, standing in the waiting area of the FloraMedex medical dispensary bag of marijuana products in hand. "I actually got a receipt."

To qualify for the program, a patient must have a prescription for an [opioid](#) or a doctor must determine that one could be prescribed. Before a patient can register, they must visit a doctor, who will electronically submit a physician certification.

The patient can then register on the program's website, or seek help registering at a dispensary or local health department. Patients need copies of their driver's licenses or state IDs and a passport-style photo and pay \$10.

Once all that is uploaded into the state's system, patients will be approved for 90 days in the program and receive registration certificates via email. They'll be able to buy marijuana shortly after registering.

Calls from patients curious about the program have been coming in to

the pain clinic 1Body1Life since Gov. Bruce Rauner signed the opioid program into law in August, said clinical director Mark Frahm, a chiropractor. The clinic, with locations in Chicago and Naperville, has helped five people register since the state opened registration last week, including Altman.

It's been frustrating to not be able to offer patients suffering from pain an alternative to opioids, said Frahm, who was at FloraMedex, owned by Chicago-based Cresco Labs, last Friday. This program has the potential to bring them relief, he said.

"If they ask or they want this, we're able to help them out," he said.

Industry operators expect the new program to significantly increase participation in Illinois' broader medical marijuana pilot program. More than 52,000 patients were enrolled at the beginning of January, when the state last provided a count. At maturity, medical cannabis programs typically reach about 1 to 2 percent of a state's population. In Illinois, that's 128,000 to 256,000 people. With medical marijuana as a legal replacement for prescription opioids, the reach could increase to 3 to 4 percent of the population.

For months now, the number of patients allowed to use medical marijuana has been growing at a quicker pace as the stigma surrounding the drug, which is still illegal on the federal level, begins to fade.

Prescribed [opioids](#) but want to try medical marijuana instead? A new Illinois program will let you. Here's how.

Illinois' medical marijuana program is set to expire in July 2020, and it will be up to the new governor, J.B. Pritzker, and state lawmakers to make it permanent. Pritzker promised in his inaugural address last month that he would work to legalize recreational marijuana.

Dispensaries around the state have been preparing for increased demand. They have extended hours and added staffers, many of whom have been trained to help patients register for the program.

But dispensary operators aren't expecting the new participants to come flooding in at once. It will take time for people to learn about the program and get registered, said Anthony Marsico, chief retail operating officer at Verano, a Chicago-based cannabis company that operates two Illinois dispensaries.

"You're not going to see the long lines you see ... when a state goes from medical to (recreational marijuana)," he said. "There's going to be a pretty large role the industry has to play in educating both the patients and the physicians in how to get the program off the ground."

The program will probably take a couple of weeks to gain momentum, as patients meet with doctors and enroll, said Rick Armstrong, general manager of Mission Chicago South Shore dispensary. But calls have been coming in to the dispensary in the South Chicago neighborhood.

"(They're) saying, 'Hey, I heard about this opioid bill, can I just come in?'" Armstrong said. "At that point, we tell them, 'actually, you have to go to your physician,' and we give them instructions. So they're asking the right questions."

The law Rauner signed in August also eliminated the requirement for patients to undergo fingerprinting and a background check before registering for Illinois' broader [medical marijuana](#) pilot program. Additionally, the Department of Public Health will now grant applicants provisional access while their applications are reviewed, allowing them quicker access to the drug.

On Friday morning, the waiting area at FloraMedex in Elmwood Park

was abuzz as the staff checked in the first opioid program [patients](#) and walked them into the dispensary to buy cannabis products.

When Altman and another patient who sought pain relief from sports injuries emerged with their newly purchased marijuana, both said they were excited to have a variety of products they could take throughout the day.

Altman had capsules she said she can take day or night, and wild-cherry flavored gummies she can eat when she's in pain. She bought a strain of [marijuana](#) called Pineapple Express, which is better for smoking at night when she needs to chill out.

All the products were clearly labeled with the amount of CBD and THC, and packaged in colored containers or white packaging.

"It's going to change a lot," she said. "I'll actually know what I'm getting now."

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