

Iowa’s medical cannabis program competing with cheaper, unregulated THC products

House File 2605 would allow regulation of consumable hemp

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Climbing Kites, Iowa’s first cannabis-infused sparkling water, features varying doses of THC and CBD. (Big Grove Brewery)

Participation in Iowa’s medical cannabis program has leveled off as Iowans flock to cheaper, largely unregulated consumable hemp products, regulators said Friday.

The number of cardholders in Iowa’s medical pot program [nearly doubled in 2022](#) and still was rising in early 2023. But since September, cardholder numbers have flattened at around 18,000.

The number of people who visited Iowa’s five licensed dispensaries was virtually unchanged in 2023, as was the average transaction amount.

“We are starting to see somewhat of the patient population plateauing,” Owen Parker, chief of Iowa’s Bureau of Cannabis Regulation, told the Iowa Medical Cannabidiol Advisory Board Friday. “We have the [consumable hemp and the intoxicating products](#) in that marketplace to serve as a competitive influence to people participating in the program.”

Iowa’s medical marijuana program, created in 2015 and expanded several times since, allows for people with certain medical conditions to buy products licensed in Iowa with a maximum of 4.5 grams THC per 90-day purchase in most cases. THC is the primary chemical in a marijuana plant that causes the “high.”

Iowa’s consumable hemp program limits the THC in products, including food, drinks and lotions, to 0.3 percent by weight.

Dr. Robert Shreck, a Des Moines oncologist and a board member, showed the advisory board some of the consumable hemp products he purchased in Des Moines. These included a 12-ounce canned beverage that contains 100 milligrams of tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, and gummies with 20 mg of THC each.

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The cost per milligram of THC was 15 cents for the beverage and 7.2 cents for the gummies, Shreck said. This is compared to 19 cents per milligram for products licensed to be sold under the medical marijuana program.

“The hemp market will definitely affect the medical program,” he said. “They may allow an outlet for folks who are looking for more than medical benefits or seeking euphoria.”

He purchased both legally with just an ID showing he was over 21 — required by the store, [but not by law](#).

[House File 2605](#), now being [considered by the Iowa Legislature](#), would provide regulation of consumable hemp, including restrictions on age to purchase and THC limits per serving and per container.

Parker said he’s been working with the Iowa Health and Human Services medical director and Iowa poison control officials to see what data is available about Iowans having adverse reactions to cannabis products and ending up in the emergency room.

Two other cannabis-related bills still are alive in the Iowa Legislature’s 2024 session.

[Senate File 2335](#) would double the number of medical marijuana dispensaries to 10 and allow a license holder to operate three. [House File 2573](#) would require practitioners who certify medical conditions so patients can qualify for a medical marijuana card to follow certain medical standards.

Bills that did not get required support to advance this session include [House Study Bill 532](#), which would have added vaporizable flower to the list of legal forms of medical cannabis available in Iowa.

The Iowa Cannabis Co., which holds one of Iowa’s two licenses to manufacture medical cannabis products from a plant on Iowa City’s southeast side, should have products available to sell within the month, Parker said. The company has [missed several deadlines](#) to have products available to sell, but Parker said the delay reflects the challenges of opening a regulated manufacturing site.

“It’s exciting to have some parity in our market and some new products added,” he said.

The other licensed manufacturer is [Bud & Mary’s, based in Des Moines](#).

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