

Exhibit #17

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Cannabis oil 'light years away' for Iowa families



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(Photo: Tony Leys/The Register)

The Iowa parents who persuaded lawmakers last spring to approve the use of marijuana oil to treat epilepsy say they're nowhere close to obtaining the medicine for their children.

"I feel like it's still light years away," Sally Gaer said today. "We have a lot more work to do."

The West Des Moines mother helped persuade legislators to decriminalize possession of a marijuana extract for patients, like her daughter, who suffer seizures from epilepsy. But the law included no legal method for growing or selling the product. State administrators are still working out the details of how to issue ID cards allowing residents to possess marijuana extract bought in other states.

Gaer and other parents believe their children's seizures could be significantly dampened with a form of marijuana oil that has low levels of THC, the chemical that makes marijuana users high. But they remain unable to legally obtain the oil, which is said to have worked well in other states.

Gaer and another mother of epileptic children, Kim Novy of Altoona, spoke of their frustrations Tuesday in an interview after a hearing before state administrators.

The mothers noted that most publicity about the marijuana extract has focused on producers in Colorado. But Colorado law only allows sales of the medication to Colorado residents, they said. They've heard that once they have their Iowa-issued cards, they might be allowed to purchase the extract in Oregon. "What are we all going to do, get in a wagon train and go over the mountains?" Gaer said with a wry laugh.

The women said they were disappointed by how long it's taking Iowa officials to implement the law, which technically took effect July 1. "Everybody keeps coming up to me and saying, 'How's that oil working for your daughters?'" Novy said. She explains that her family is at least several months away being able to take advantage of the new law.

The women said they have found Iowa-licensed neurologists willing to sign a form recommending the marijuana extract for their children, as the Iowa law requires. However, the form has not been created yet by state officials. If the families can find an out-of-state supplier willing to sell the oil to them, they would face a cost of several hundred to more than a thousand dollars per month – plus the cost of travel. They also could risk arrest for carrying the oil through states that don't allow it.

Iowa Department of Public Health administrator Deborah Thompson said during the hearing that state officials hope to start issuing registration cards by the end of the year. She said she understood that people were frustrated by the pace of implementation. But, she added, "there are a lot of moving parts for any new program."

A few dozen Iowans participated in the hearing, either in Des Moines or via video linkups to other cities.

Several people raised concerns that Iowa's medical-marijuana law was limited to people who want to use the medication to control seizures from epilepsy.

"There's many other people that suffer that should not have to suffer like they do," said Linda Gale of Sioux City, who said she has Crohn's disease, an intestinal disorder that can cause chronic pain and nausea. She said she's been given heavy-duty pain pills for her condition.

"I'm not quite sure what the fear of cannabis oil is, when I take all these narcotics that make me sick and make me not be able to function," she said.

Boris Shcharansky of Des Moines wants the state to let his company obtain marijuana oil in other states and deliver it to families with medical needs in Iowa. He said any Iowa families who tried to use the current law to obtain marijuana for a child in Colorado would be committing a state crime there and a federal crime when they carried the medication across the border. "It is unacceptable to force families to break state and federal laws in order to obtain an oil that can, without exaggeration, save lives," he said. "The families dealing with the tragedy of epilepsy have gone through enough."

Thompson, the health-department administrator, responded to such points by urging people to contact their legislators.

Gov. Terry Branstad, a Republican, initially opposed efforts to legalize marijuana for any purpose, but he praised the limited bill during a public signing ceremony in June. His spokesman, Jimmy Centers, said Tuesday that health-department administrators are working as fast as they can, given that the Legislature declined to give them emergency rulemaking powers for this measure. "Gov. Branstad is committed to working, within the bounds of the law,

to help Iowa families and their loved ones get the care they need," Centers said.

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Sen. Joe Bolkcom, an Iowa City Democrat who has spearheaded the effort to legalize medical marijuana, said Tuesday that he sympathizes with the families' frustrations.

Bolkcom praised Gaer, Novy and other parents who persevered last spring to get the Legislature's approval for the bill. He expressed optimism that legislators would listen to them again if they return to the Statehouse in January to explain problems with the new law. "I think these moms are 10 paces ahead of us on understanding what's going on," he said. "Our work ahead is identifying the barriers and moving them out of the way."

However, any effort to expand the law could face serious opposition. Rep. Clel Baudler, a Greenfield Republican known for his law-and-order views, was a key supporter of the limited medical marijuana bill last spring. Baudler, a retired state trooper, expressed skepticism Tuesday about the chances that lawmakers would approve major revisions next year. "I think most people want to see the results of this law before they jump in" to broaden it, he said.

Gaer and Novy said Tuesday that they will keep pushing. Gaer said she's rooting for a Congressional bill that would legalize interstate shipment of the marijuana oil for patients who need it. Both women said they remain optimistic. "You have to be," Novy said. "When you're in our situation, you can't give up hope. We live on hope."

Earlier: Sally Gaer makes marijuana plea for disabled daughter



Sally Gaer, of West Des Moines, is rallying support for legalizing medical marijuana in Iowa to treat her daughter Margaret, who suffers from violent seizures.

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