Overview of South Dakota’s 2020 medical marijuana initiative

Initiated Measure 26 would legalize medical marijuana for patients diagnosed with serious health conditions. With a recommendation from their doctor, a patient would be able to register for the program. It would also establish a system of dispensaries overseen by the Department of Health and require laboratory testing to ensure product safety.

Why should South Dakota establish a medical marijuana program?

>> Medical cannabis is effective in alleviating serious health conditions

In 2017, the National Academies of Sciences (NAS) released a landmark report ("The Health Effects of Cannabis and Cannabinoids") that reviewed over 10,000 academic studies on the effects of cannabis. It found "conclusive or substantial evidence" that cannabis is effective for the treatment of chronic pain, nausea and vomiting, and multiple sclerosis. It also found evidence that cannabis is effective for improving sleep, anxiety, PTSD, and traumatic brain injury. More recent research published since the NAS report indicates that medical cannabis can also be helpful in the treatment of epileptic seizures and autism.

>> Medical cannabis is safe

A 2015 study compared the toxicity of cannabis to many other commonly used substances. Cannabis was found to be the safest in terms of its potential to trigger a fatal overdose. The federal Drug Enforcement Agency confirms that "[N]o deaths from overdose of marijuana have been reported." Compared to many prescription drugs, including opioid pain medications, medical cannabis is safer and less addictive.

>> Medical cannabis laws are associated with reductions in opioid prescribing and overdoses

- Research published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that states with medical laws experienced 25% fewer opioid-related overdose fatalities compared to other states from 1999 through 2010.

- A 2018 study analyzed opioid prescribing in states with and without medical cannabis laws from 2011 through 2016. Researchers wrote, "[s]tate implementation of medical marijuana laws was associated with a 5.88% lower rate of opioid prescribing."

- According to another analysis published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, "[p]rescriptions for all opioids decreased by 3.742 million daily doses per year when medical cannabis dispensaries opened."

- Research published in Drug and Alcohol Dependence found that "[m]edical marijuana legalization was associated with 23% and 13% reductions in hospitalizations related to opioid dependence or abuse and [opioid] overdose, respectively."
In a study conducted by the Minnesota Department of Health, 63% of patients who use medical cannabis for pain were able to reduce or eliminate their use of opiate drugs within six months.

**Medical cannabis laws save states money on health care costs**

Research from the University of Georgia found that medical cannabis laws reduce prescription medication use in Medicare Part D: “National overall reductions in Medicare program and enrollee spending when states implemented medical marijuana laws were estimated to be $165.2 million per year in 2013.” In another study published in Health Affairs, researchers found that Medicaid would have saved $1 billion in 2014 if all states had legalized medical marijuana.

**Medical cannabis laws are not associated with increases in teen use**

Study after study has concluded that marijuana policy reform is not linked to increased rates of marijuana use among teens. A 2018 meta-analysis of 11 studies on adolescent cannabis use and medical cannabis laws concluded that "the current evidence does not support the hypothesis that US medical marijuana laws ... have led to increases in adolescent marijuana use prevalence." Authors of a 2019 study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reached the same conclusion: "Consistent with the results of previous researchers, there was no evidence that the legalization of medical marijuana encourages marijuana use among youth."

**Medical cannabis laws are not associated with increased fatal traffic accidents**

There is no evidence that medical marijuana laws make roads and highways less safe. In fact, after analyzing 1.2 million traffic fatalities nationwide from 1985 through 2014, researchers published a study in the *American Journal of Public Health* that found, on average, traffic fatalities fell 11% in states that legalized medical marijuana. Other research, published in the *Journal of Law and Economics*, reached a similar conclusion: “The first full year after coming into effect, [medical marijuana] legalization is associated with an 8–11 percent decrease in traffic fatalities.”