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from the front page

A DAILY SUN SPECIAL REPORT

MARIJUANA

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cannabis certifications to 136,274 patients from Jan. 1, 2018, through Sept. 30, according to the first report submitted to the Legislature tracking this data. The three counties that make up The Villages accounted for 3,675 of those certifications — but only 18 of them in Sumter County, and all by the same doctor. In Lake County, 19 doctors combined to issue 1,635 certifications, and in Marion 11 doctors wrote 2,022.

More senior patients are seeking medical marijuana, said Dr. Harsha Rajashekar, interventional pain specialist with The Villages Health and a certified medical marijuana physician.

“I’m very surprised at how many people are interested in this, and the success rate, too,” he said.

Chronic, nonmalignant pain accounted for the most certifications statewide at 48,259, according to the new report by the Florida Board of Medicine and the Florida Board of Osteopathic Medicine. The entities are required by law to issue an annual report tracking the number of physician certifications and the qualifying medical conditions, dosage, supply amount and form of marijuana certified.

“The most recent report validated that people are continuously looking for safer alternatives than traditional medicines and ones that are more effective and have less side effects,” said George Scorsis, CEO of Liberty Health Sciences, one of two medical cannabis companies that have set up shop near The Villages.

A Burgeoning Industry

Demand is reflected by the growth of companies. Eighty-nine dispensaries have opened statewide, according to the most recent update from the department of health. Last January, there were only 24 dispensing locations in Florida.

Trulieve, the largest medical marijuana operator in the

NEW SURVEY REVEALS BROAD SUPPORT FOR MEDICAL MARIJUANA

The constitutional amendment legalizing medical marijuana won support from 71 percent of voters in 2016. A newly released survey of Florida voters says support for the law continues to grow, with approval now at 74 percent overall, while opposition has faded from 29 percent in 2016 to just 19 percent now. The survey was completed just after November’s general election and was paid for by a marijuana industry group. Here is the breakdown, by percentage, of how different groups responded.

	Overall	GOP	Ind.	Dem.	White	Black	Hispanic	18-44	45-64	65+	Male	Female
Total who favor:	74	64	74	87	73	80	73	81	80	66	74	75
Total who oppose:	19	29	16	9	19	15	22	14	15	24	19	18
No opinion:	7	7	9	4	8	5	5	5	5	10	7	8

state and owner of a Lady Lake dispensary, recently opened its 24th dispensary.

It’s a testament to word of mouth about the efficacy of medical cannabis, said Victoria Walker, community relations specialist for Trulieve.

“If we find something that works for us, we tell people about it,” she said.

The cannabis compounds cannabidiol (CBD) and tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) appear to provide relief in some patients who were not helped by other treatments, Rajashekar said.

“CBD and THC are things that seem to help quite a bit with pain,” he said. “And the opioid epidemic is something so severe that we have to try any techniques available.”

Villager Able to Ditch Opioids

Janet Schiff said that thanks to medical marijuana, she is off pain narcotics for the first time in decades.

Her agony began with a fall down a flight of stairs. Then, a botched ankle surgery to correct her injury led to nerve damage.

“I’ve been in constant pain for the last 30 years,” said the Village of Lynnhaven resident, who is not Rajashekar’s patient.

Schiff tried to go off pain meds four years ago. She lasted eight days.

“I couldn’t stand it,” Schiff said. “I was in a ball in my bed for eight days crying.”

Last year, she decided to try

medical marijuana as an alternative. By ingesting and vaping medical marijuana before bed, she is able to sleep through the night without opioids.

In addition to 11 named qualifying conditions, lawmakers stated patients could receive medical marijuana for similar conditions not listed in guidelines. After chronic pain, that category accounted for the most certifications — 47,527. Post-traumatic stress disorder led to 41,143 certifications, while cancer was the fourth-most common illness treated with 17,133 certifications.

Stigma Starting to Wear Off

Schiff, who also was diagnosed with breast cancer last year, qualifies in two categories.

Michele Brady, a breast cancer survivor, said medical marijuana remains a hot topic in the local cancer support group.

“People want more information,” she said. “I think the stigma is starting to wear off a little bit.”

Brady, of the Village of Dunedin, said several members have shared that medical cannabis helped ease side effects from treatment, in ways such as increasing appetite and helping with anxiety.

More physicians seem to be embracing marijuana as a treatment tool, Rajashekar said, a big change from when he was in medical school 17 years ago. “Marijuana was spoken in

drug abuse as a gateway drug,” he recalled. “Nothing as a benefit to society or to health.”

Patients Don’t Want to Get High

Research has shown marijuana can be effective for pain, anxiety and PTSD management, Rajashekar said, and the list likely will grow as more studies are done.

CBD also does not appear to cause many side effects, though THC’s psychoactive components may, he said.

The most common concern shared by his patients is that they don’t want to get high, Rajashekar said.

“They’re interested in getting relief,” he said. “Medical marijuana is all about that. It’s not about getting high.”

About half of his patients have found success with the treatment, Rajashekar said.

“It’s not a miracle. It’s not getting rid of all of their pain. But it’s allowing them to do much more than they were before,” he said. “In turn, being active allows them to be healthier.”

Patients also frequently ask about CBD oil that is available for purchase in stores without a doctor’s recommendation.

That is derived from the hemp plant, which is part of the same cannabis family but differs from marijuana plants.

It may have merit as a treatment, but Rajashekar warned that unlike medical marijuana, it is not highly regulated, so

they may not be receiving any CBD in the products.

If you know someone who has found relief with it, Rajashekar recommends sticking to the exact brand they used.

Frustrations With the State

Blaming lagging or unconstitutional regulations, some patients say they cannot access

marijuana in forms that should be available based on the constitutional amendment that was approved by 71 percent of voters in 2016.

They question the constitutionality of a ban on smoking medical marijuana included in the law crafted by legislators to guide implementation of the amendment. Vaping is allowed.

A Florida state judge agreed that the ban violated what voters approved in the constitutional amendment, but the state Health Department challenged the decision with a lawsuit.

Medical marijuana companies have sued over the cap on the number of licenses issued by the state. Fourteen companies are currently licensed to cultivate and sell.

A circuit judge agreed that the limit violates the constitutional amendment, ordering the department to issue additional licenses. But the state appealed the ruling, and the case has been on hold ever since.

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Then there's the issue of edible cannabis products. Florida's law listed edibles among approved forms. Trulieve recently reached a deal to bring edibles to Florida. But patients will have to wait until FDOH approves the products for sale.

Governor Demands Change

Gov. Ron DeSantis on Thursday criticized the law the Legislature passed to implement the constitutional amendment and demanded a new law by mid-March — or else. He wants the new measure to end the ban on smoking medical marijuana and to loosen limits on treatment center licenses.

If lawmakers fail to act, he threatened to drop the state's challenges to lawsuits over those issues. "I want to have the elected representatives write the law in a way the people intended, so we'll give them a couple of weeks in session to address the smoking issue, and if they don't do it, we're going to dismiss the case and move on," DeSantis said.

Florida's new Republican legislative leaders, Senate President Bill Galvano and House Speaker Jose Oliva, said they will work with DeSantis to amend the law. Galvano said in a news release that implementing the constitutional amendment "has been an ongoing problem mired in complex and protracted legal challenges."

"Governor DeSantis has indicated that he prefers a legislative solution rather than a judicial order to bring the issue of implementation of the amendment to a conclusion. A legislative solution has always been my preferred course of action, and we will certainly honor the governor's request," Galvano said.

Newly elected Agriculture Commissioner Nikki Fried,

COMPARING MEDICAL MARIJUANA AND LOW-THC CANNABIS

Medical Marijuana — All medical products with levels of tetrahydrocannabinol higher than 0.8 percent. Because of the significant amount of THC, it can cause a "high" reaction. Medical cannabis includes all parts of the plant, including seeds and resin extracted from any part of the cannabis plant. Low-THC Cannabis — Means a plant of the genus Cannabis, the dried flowers of which contain 0.8 percent or less of tetrahydrocannabinol and more than 10 percent of cannabidiol weight. Patients taking this typically do not experience a "high" commonly associated with cannabis because of the low amounts of THC in the dose.

Source: Florida Department of Health

a former lobbyist for the medical marijuana industry, also supports dropping the smoking ban.

Fried has said she is creating a new position in the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services called the director of cannabis to oversee agricultural hemp and medical marijuana edibles.

Next Big Thing: Edibles

From his perspective as CEO of Liberty Health Sciences, Scorsis said, the health department's approach thus far has been largely positive.

"They have consistently asked for input from the licensed producers," he said. "With that being said, we need to move faster with edibles and the offering of flower."

Walker said Trulieve is excited to sell edibles, pending the department's approval, though she said it will take some time once that is received before patients can receive the products.

"We're hopeful for some very positive changes," she said.

More Expensive Than Meds

Even if these changes occur, barriers for patients will remain — including cost.

Insurance does not cover

any form of medical marijuana, which the federal government still classifies as illegal.

A recent survey of Florida voters found that 77 percent want to see it covered by private health insurance companies.

Sixty-nine percent also thought Medicaid should cover medical marijuana. The survey was conducted by Fabrizio, Lee & Associates and ALG Research, and paid for by an industry group.

Cost has been the biggest setback for Schiff, who used to have a \$45 co-pay for her pain prescriptions.

She now spends \$200 to \$300 per month on medical marijuana, and \$75 per year to remain in the patient registry.

Because of the cost, she said, she is not able to take medical marijuana to manage her pain during the day, reserving her supplies for bedtime so she can sleep.

"I'm always in pain. I was always in pain even with the pain medicine," she said. "I definitely think it would help. I know it would, I just can't afford it."

Information from the Associated Press was included in this report. Ciara Varone is a senior writer with The Villages Daily Sun. She can be reached at 352-753-1119, ext. 5395, or ciara.varone@thevillagesmedia.com.

DeSantis Charts New Course for Florida on Medical Marijuana

New governor orders an about-face on smoking ban, cap on licenses.

News Service of Florida



DeSantis

Gov. Ron DeSantis has delivered an ultimatum to state lawmakers over medical marijuana.

Saying they failed to heed the will of voters, DeSantis ordered Florida lawmakers Thursday to eliminate a ban on smokable medical marijuana and, if they don't comply, threatened to drop the state's appeal of a court ruling that found the prohibition ran afoul of a 2016 constitutional amendment.

The new Republican governor said he also wants lawmakers to address other components of a 2017 law that was passed to carry out the constitutional amendment. DeSantis said lawmakers should revisit a cap on the number of medical-marijuana licenses and a "vertical integration" system that requires operators to grow, process and distribute cannabis products.

"This is all about doing the people's will," DeSantis said.

DeSantis made the announcement while flanked by U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz, a former state representative who played a key role in the legislature on medical marijuana issues, and Orlando trial lawyer John Morgan, who largely bankrolled the constitutional amendment and who initiated the legal challenge to the smoking ban.

An overwhelming number of Floridians, "about as big a majority as you can get in this day and age," wanted patients with debilitating conditions to

have access to medical marijuana, under the supervision of physicians, the governor said.

"Whether they have to smoke it or not, who am I to judge that? I want people to be able to have their suffering relieved. I don't think this law is up to snuff," he said.

DeSantis, a Harvard-educated lawyer, said he would prefer to have lawmakers deal with the issue rather than leave it to the courts, noting that the state is involved in several marijuana-related legal challenges.

"I want to use the fact that we are in litigation as leverage to get better laws passed," he said.

The legislature held a special session in 2017 and passed the

law that included the smoking ban and limits on licenses. Supporters said the smoking ban was needed because of health dangers from smoking.

But DeSantis used harsh words to critique the medical-marijuana system created by the legislature and gave lawmakers a short time frame to address what could be a thorny issue. The governor said he would ask the courts to put the appeal in the smokable marijuana case on hold until mid-March; the 2019 legislative session begins on March 5.

"I want to have the elected representatives write the law in the way that the people intended. We'll give them a couple weeks in session to address the smoking issue. And if they don't do it, we're going to dismiss the case. We're going to move on," he said.

"The legislature can't just decide not to implement it (the constitutional amendment) the way it was intended. So I hope by giving them this notice, by giving them a deadline, they'll get the job done."

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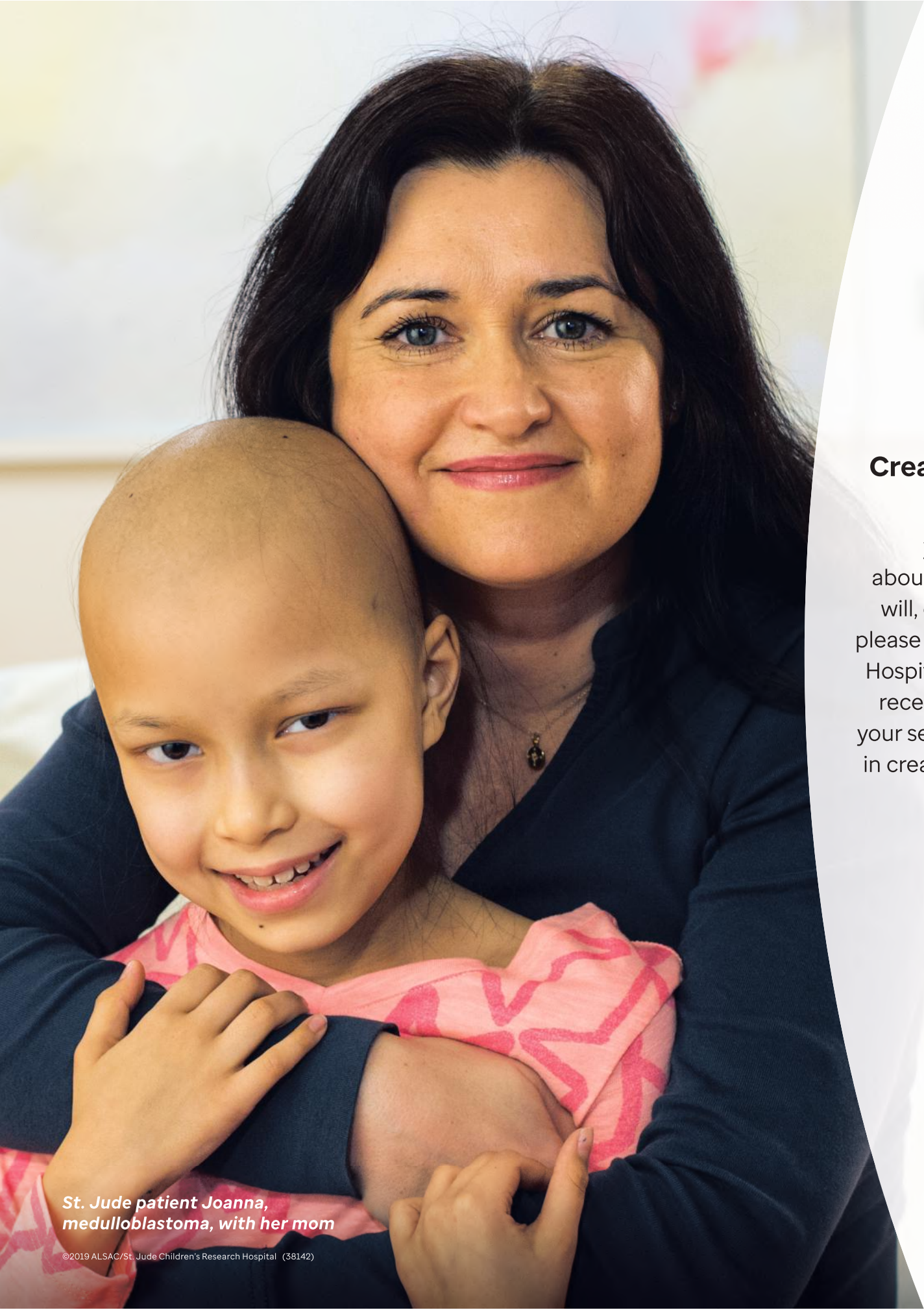
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