

New medical pot makers will operate in Cottage Grove, Otsego

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Minnesota has chosen two companies to grow and sell the state's entire supply of medical marijuana.

LeafLine Labs and Minnesota Medical Solutions are led by doctors and backed by enough deep-pocketed investors to presumably keep them solvent through what's likely to be a rocky launch for the fledgling cannabis industry.

Minnesota Health Department Commissioner Ed Ehlinger announced the state's selection Monday, after an exhaustive review of the 12 companies that applied — and paid a \$20,000 nonrefundable application fee — for the job. The state, he said, chose the two companies it deemed most capable of cultivating, manufacturing and distributing a safe, high-quality medicine that's still considered an illegal drug by the federal government and half the states.

"This program is ultimately all about getting ill people medicine that can help reduce their suffering," Ehlinger said. "This is an important day for the rollout of the program, and an important day for those Minnesotans suffering from conditions that may be improved through the use of medical cannabis."

An estimated 5,000 patients with conditions ranging from cancer to glaucoma to Crohn's disease could register for the Minnesota Medical Cannabis program next year, although the state said the figure could be three times larger.

Monday's announcement was the starting gun for the two manufacturers.

LeafLine, which was launched by a Minnesota emergency room physician and 10 members of the Bachman family of florists, will break ground this month on a 42,000-square-foot pharmaceutical-grade manufacturing facility in Cottage Grove. It will begin selling medical marijuana out of a distribution center in Eagan next July 1, with other locations to open in Hibbing, St. Cloud and St. Paul.

Minnesota Medical Solutions, also founded by an emergency room physician, has already built a secure greenhouse and manufacturing facility in Otsego, and will be launching its operations this week. It plans to open distribution facilities by next July in Rochester, Maple Grove, Minneapolis and Moorhead.



Minnesotans will take medical cannabis in pills or liquids. Pretty much any form but flammable plant form.

Jennifer Brooks, Star Tribune



An example of what medical marijuana containers will look like when dispensed in Minnesota,

Jennifer Brooks, Star Tribune



Dr. Ed Ehlinger, commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Health, announced the selection of LeafLine Labs and Minnesota Medical Solutions to become the registered manufacturers responsible for growing, processing, and distributing medical cannabis products as part of the state's new medical cannabis program.

Leila Navidi, Star Tribune

LeafLine founders Dr. Gary Starr and Dr. Andrew Bachman said their experience as physicians, dealing with patients who weren't helped by standard medical treatments, turned them, in Starr's words, into "staunch patient advocates for medical cannabis."

"LeafLine's patients-first — always — philosophy stems from our firsthand experience in the emergency department," Starr said. He'd see patients, like one elderly woman, fighting cancer and bedridden, whose chronic pain reduced her to tears. "I could not solve that problem. This patient's not alone. We see tough cases every day ... many conditions for which medical cannabis may be a potential therapy."

Minnesota's Legislature passed one of the nation's most stringent medical marijuana legalization laws this year, restricting not only the number of patients who can register for the program, but limiting the sale of the drug only to pill or liquid form, not the plant itself.

For the doctors, those restrictions are part of the appeal, allowing them to tailor the doses for patients ranging from tiny children with epilepsy to terminally ill patients gripped by wracking pain.

The Health Department estimates that anywhere from 5,000 to 15,000 patients could register for the program, and Ehlinger has the discretion to expand the program to other conditions, including intractable pain, with the Legislature's blessing. In many states, pain patients make up the bulk of patients enrolled in the program — 93 percent of patients in Colorado's medical marijuana program listed pain as one of their qualifying medical conditions.

"Medical cannabis is not the cure-all some portray it to be," said Dr. Kyle Kingsley, founder of Minnesota Medical Solutions.

"But it can alleviate the suffering of many, and that's a great thing for these patients."

Kingsley said MinnMed's founders also "respect the fact that some Minnesotans are unsettled about medical cannabis. We take their apprehensions very seriously. In fact, we are doing this because we share their concerns and we want to do things the responsible and right way."

A few Minnesota communities have shied away from the idea of welcoming a marijuana facility to town. Duluth, which spent years locked in legal battles with a local head shop, imposed a temporary moratorium on even debating the issue.

The Cottage Grove and Otsego city councils signed off on the manufacturing facilities in September.

LeafLine estimates that its facility will employ 35 people initially, and that building the manufacturing facility and greenhouse will create 100 construction jobs. MinnMed estimates that it will employ six to 15 people at the Otsego facility in the first year, with another three to five workers at each of its four dispensaries.



From left, Dr. Gary Starr, co-founder of LeafLine Labs and his partner Dr. Andrew Bachman, Dr. Kyle Kingsley, CEO of Minnesota Medical Solutions, and its scientific director, Dr. Jon Thompson, Minnesota Department of Health assistant commissioner Manny Munson-Regala and commissioner Dr. Ed Ehlinger appeared Monday at a news conference on medical marijuana production.

Photos by LEILA NAVIDI • leila.navid@startribune.com,



At left, an example of what the THC-dominant cannabis pills will look like. The tincture cannabis packaging is at right.

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DONOT TYPE IN THIS BOX An example of how the tincture cannabis product packaging will look from Minnesota Medical Solutions during a press conference at the Minnesota Department of Health in St. Paul on Monday, December 1, 2014.] LEILA NAVIDI leila.navid@startribune.com /

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