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By Nick Vlahos

October 21, 2014 8:50PM

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Three groups apply for medical marijuana licenses in Peoria

PEORIA — Medical marijuana might be coming to Peoria soon. Just don't look for any name brands.

Trade titles of the organizations that have submitted marijuana cultivation and dispensary applications make no mention of their primary proposed product. Illinois Therapeutic Health Center, Midwestern Wellness Group of Illinois and Trinity Compassionate Care Centers could be selling chemotherapy, crutches or colostomy bags, for all their names imply.

But the implications of the state's Medical Cannabis Pilot Program on the Peoria area might be far from discreet, according to those affiliated with these firms. And they believe their product is no different from any other medicine.

"Every person in Peoria is affected by this," said Ben Rediger, patient care and education director for Trinity. "Everyone has a relative with cancer, Alzheimer's disease, epilepsy. If this is laid out in a factual and honest format to the public, it'll be easier to understand as our business opens.

"This is a fundamental shift in American culture and American medicine. ... It is more and more accepted and understood. I would love to help build what is established here and revitalize Peoria in a way that extends beyond Caterpillar and the hospitals."

Rediger's group has asked the state for the right to establish a dispensary in a strip mall at Forrest Hill Avenue and University Street. Trinity is one of two applicants for that site.

Illinois Therapeutic Health Center has applied for another dispensary site, in a former music store at Radnor Road and Willow Knolls Drive. The locally based firm also is among seven cultivation-center applicants in the Illinois State Police district that includes Marshall, Peoria, Stark, Tazewell and Woodford counties.

Fadi Rustom, a Peoria attorney who is the health center CEO and legal counsel, said his aim is to create a seed-to-sale operation. His firm might be able to offer as many as 40 different varieties of pot, which have differing effects on patients.

"We're able to get cultivation experts in to teach us about different strains," Rustom said. "We can take that knowledge and give it to our patient caregivers. That knowledge will flow internally throughout our company.

"I don't know the first thing about growing marijuana. But I do know in terms of the business model, that's how we wanted to go about it."

Rustom wouldn't give the address of the proposed cultivation facility in Peoria. He did say it's to be situated in an 82,000-square-foot building along Galena Road, near the northern Peoria-Peoria Heights boundary.

In Peoria, cultivation centers can be located only in areas zoned for industrial use. Dispensaries can be located in areas that also allow pharmacies.

Over the next two months, the City Council is expected to discuss changing the dispensary policy. Changes would not affect the current applicants.

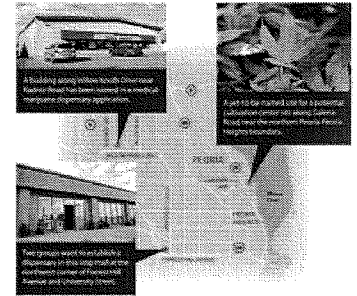
State regulations stipulate medical-pot dispensaries must be located at least 1,000 feet from a school or day-care facility. That leaves five or fewer locations in Peoria that qualify, according to Rodney Nordstrom, a local attorney who represents Lake Barrington-based Trinity.

"The parking is there, and it's very accessible," Nordstrom said about the Forrest Hill-University location. "The access, the community."

That might help explain why Midwestern Wellness Group is applying for the same location. Dennis Lindell, a Naperville attorney who represents Midwestern Wellness Group, did not respond to repeated requests for an interview.

Rustom and the Trinity representatives said their facilities would feature 24-hour security and other surveillance. Access to the Trinity dispensary would be limited to patients and perhaps their caregivers, Rediger suggested.

Patients will be allowed to buy up to 2.5 ounces of pot product every two weeks. The product might come in forms that can be smoked, eaten, swallowed or



inhaled. Rediger and Rustom said prices could range from \$250 to \$400 per ounce.

"It's a tad bit more expensive than what you'd find on the black market," Rustom said. "But there's a lot more emphasis on safety."

Before the end of this year, the state probably will notify successful applicants. The program is temporary. It's to expire at the end of 2017, unless the General Assembly and the governor decide to renew it.

The local applicants appear to believe renewal might be a formality.

"It's going to take a lot of education, but it's way overdue," Nordstrom said. "The country is ready for these type of changes, and the overall success outweighs any of the detriments and any of the concerns a lot of people have had."

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