

# High Stakes for Nebraska Families in Medical Cannabis Fight

## Nebraska Families Rally for Medical Cannabis as Initiative Measures 437 and 438 Head to November Ballot

Nebraska's ongoing fight for medical cannabis legalization has been fueled by personal stories of hardship and hope, none more poignant than that of Shelley and Dominic Gillen. The Gillens have been at the forefront of advocacy efforts, sharing their experience caring for their son Will, who suffers from severe daily seizures. Their journey, along with the experiences of other families, is shaping the conversation around medical cannabis and pushing Nebraska closer to a historic vote on Initiative Measures 437 and 438.

### A Family's Struggle: The Gillens' Push for Relief

For the Gillen family, the quest to legalize medical cannabis in Nebraska is more than a political issue; it's about saving their son's life. Will Gillen, who experiences frequent and debilitating seizures, has spent countless nights in the hospital due to his condition. His mother, Shelley, testified about the toll these seizures have taken on their lives at a recent public hearing at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

"Seizures have forced us to call 911, have landed him in the ER, and have had him admitted for hospital stays countless times," Shelley Gillen said. She shared that Will's seizures have led to injuries ranging from black eyes to broken bones, describing the extent of her son's suffering and the physical damage he has endured. For Shelley and Dominic, medical cannabis represents a potentially life-changing option that could provide Will with relief unavailable through other treatments.

Will's father, Dominic, recounted a particularly harrowing experience when his son required a two-week hospital stay due to seizures. "There was a very real fear that he was going to die," he recalled. The Gillens are among the many Nebraska families who see medical cannabis as a final, hopeful option in their fight against severe medical conditions, and they are determined to see it legalized.

### Initiative Measures 437 and 438: What's at Stake

The upcoming ballot in November will give Nebraskans the chance to vote on two key measures, Initiative 437 and Initiative 438, which would establish a framework for legal medical cannabis in the state. If passed, these measures would allow legal access to medical cannabis for patients, caregivers, and medical providers, overseen by a newly formed Nebraska Medical Cannabis Commission.

Initiative Measure 437 would permit qualified patients to possess up to five ounces of THC—a point of contention among opponents but seen by advocates as essential for addressing the needs of those with chronic and severe medical conditions. Initiative 438 complements this by providing a regulatory structure for medical cannabis, ensuring that any approved use is carefully monitored and managed through licensed providers.

For patients like Will Gillen, these measures could open a pathway to medical cannabis that has been inaccessible due to Nebraska's stringent cannabis laws. Currently, cannabis remains classified as a Schedule I substance under federal law, which has created numerous obstacles for legalization efforts. But with medical cannabis now legalized in 38 states and recreational use approved in 24, advocates argue it's time for Nebraska to join the growing list of states that recognize cannabis as a legitimate medical treatment.

### **Public Support and Opposition: An Ongoing Debate**

While public opinion on medical cannabis is overwhelmingly positive, with support estimated at 70% among Nebraskans, opposition remains vocal. Douglas County Sheriff Aaron Hanson was the sole opponent to testify at the recent hearing. Sheriff Hanson raised concerns over potential legal conflicts and health risks associated with the measures, arguing that the five-ounce THC limit stipulated in Measure 437 is excessive and could lead to abuse.

"The entire patient-focused system is bypassed in favor of a consumer-driven commercial industry," Hanson argued, citing the American Medical Association's stance against cannabis legalization without federal oversight. He expressed concern that a state-level cannabis program would undermine federal guidelines and create regulatory challenges, suggesting that the push for legalization could ultimately result in more harm than good.

Despite these concerns, advocates point to the medical needs of patients who have exhausted traditional treatments. For many Nebraskans, cannabis is seen as a more natural and effective alternative to pharmaceutical options, particularly for those suffering from conditions like epilepsy, chronic pain, and PTSD. The Gillens, along with other supporters, argue that medical cannabis provides a lifeline for families who have seen limited success with conventional medications.

### **Nebraska's Long Road to the Ballot: Legal and Financial Hurdles**

The journey to bring medical cannabis to the ballot has been marked by numerous obstacles, both legal and financial. Prior attempts to get similar measures on the ballot were thwarted by court challenges, particularly around language and procedural issues that prevented earlier initiatives from advancing. Legal battles have been costly for advocacy groups, straining resources and limiting outreach efforts.

Yet, supporters have persevered. Advocacy groups, including the Nebraskans for Medical Marijuana coalition, have rallied behind the measures, leveraging public support and focusing on stories like the Gillens' to highlight the humanitarian need for medical cannabis access. The group's co-founder, Crista Eggers, whose son also has epilepsy, has been instrumental in building momentum, using personal stories to resonate with voters across the state.

Campaigners have also faced financial hurdles, as Nebraska's cannabis laws restrict contributions from out-of-state donors, limiting potential funding. However, local support and grassroots fundraising have helped the initiatives gain traction, and supporters are hopeful that the high level of public support will ultimately carry the measures across the finish line.

### **The Broader Impact of Medical Cannabis in Nebraska**

For many Nebraskans, access to medical cannabis is not just a matter of convenience but a vital aspect of managing chronic and debilitating illnesses. As Shelley and Dominic Gillen, along with others, have testified, conventional treatments often fall short for those facing severe health conditions. They believe that medical cannabis could help fill this gap, providing relief with fewer side effects than many pharmaceutical drugs.

Furthermore, supporters argue that legalization would offer patients an alternative treatment while potentially alleviating the burden on Nebraska's healthcare system. By creating a regulated medical cannabis program, advocates believe that the state can ensure safe access for those who need it most, reduce the risk of misuse, and provide a controlled environment for cannabis distribution.

### **What's Next: November's Vote and the Future of Medical Cannabis in Nebraska**

As November's vote approaches, Nebraska stands at a crossroads. For families like the Gillens, the ballot measures represent hope for a more compassionate healthcare option in a state known for its tough stance on drug laws. The public's response in November will not only determine the future of medical cannabis in Nebraska but will also signal the state's stance on prioritizing patient choice and compassionate care.

The stakes are high for advocates and opponents alike. For families like the Gillens, a favorable vote could mean the difference between suffering and relief. For opponents like Sheriff Hanson, the push for legalization remains a regulatory and ethical issue, one that he believes could have far-reaching implications.

### **A Community Divided, a Future Uncertain**

The debate over medical cannabis in Nebraska reflects a community torn between tradition and progress. While advocates argue that cannabis offers a safe, effective treatment for those with severe medical needs, opponents warn of legal challenges and potential misuse. As Nebraska prepares for the November vote, families like the Gillens are urging voters to consider the human impact, hoping that the stories of real people will drive a shift in the state's stance on medical cannabis.

In the end, the Gillens' story serves as a powerful reminder that behind every vote are families fighting for the chance to improve their loved ones' lives. For Nebraska, the path forward may be uncertain, but the determination of those advocating for medical cannabis remains unwavering.

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