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U.S. Army recruit David McClure of Missouri gets a weight and height check from Staff Sgt. Joseph Bilski, right. Above, the U.S. Army Recruiting Center at 1221 Kapiolani Blvd.



Officials aim to speed up medical marijuana process

A local physician says applying for pot now is "a huge administrative burden" for doctors

By Marcel Honoré
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State health officials say they're looking to streamline the application process for medical marijuana patient cards — which some local physicians say is unduly burdensome — ahead of the first pot dispensaries to open in Hawaii next year.

The fixes could be critical for the state Department of Health if it is to keep up with the demand once dispensaries open in the state. The department, which processes about

1,100 applications a month for new cards and annual renewals, expects that number could double in 2016.

Meanwhile, some physicians say the existing application process is tedious, puts a strain on them and often leads to errors that cause further delays for patients seeking cards.

Right now potential patients must fill out online and written forms alongside their doctors. The doctors then have to send those forms to DOH and later send the card to patients who qualify. If there

are any mistakes, the application must be resent to DOH, where it goes to the back of the line so as not to delay any applications that were correctly submitted, said DOH spokeswoman Janice Okubo.

"They've created a huge administrative burden for physicians," said Dr. Clifton Otto, an Oahu-based physician who regularly certifies medical marijuana patients. "There's quite a bit of duplication in those forms."

The process, he said, is "making it very difficult for doctors to handle this," and "it becomes less worthwhile to do the certification if it has all this hassle."

Otto served on the state's medical marijuana task force last year.

Oahu-based physician Dr. David Barton echoed Otto's concerns.

"There are significant problems with the current process, and we hope they will deal with all our concerns," said Barton, who also certifies medical cannabis patients.

Okubo said that DOH is creating a new, fully online system in which patients could fill out the application separately and send it to their physician, who could then sign and send it electronically to DOH.

"It will make the system

more efficient," she said. "It will remove some of the additional steps."

DOH took over the state's 15-year-old medical marijuana program from the Department of Public Safety in January. The program's four-person staff takes three to four weeks to issue cards from when it receives the application, though there can be a lag when someone is out sick or on vacation, Okubo said.

DOH expects to launch the system before dispensaries open as early as July 2016. The latest figures, taken in January, listed 13,800 registered medical

pot patients in Hawaii. DOH hasn't yet updated that number, Okubo said.

Otto said he interprets the state's medical cannabis laws differently from DOH, and believes they allow patients to get marijuana once a physician sends their certification papers to the department.

"If the Department of Health would recognize this, then this whole delay with the cards would just disappear," Otto said Monday. "Even if there's a three-week delay, you can't expect patients who are dying ... to wait three weeks to get their card back."



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