



Bleed for Weed

Reaching New Donors Through an Unconventional Partnership

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Overview

The "Bleed for Weed" initiative was developed by Rock River Valley Blood Center as an innovative donor recruitment strategy designed to address declining donor participation and expand outreach to new audiences. Through a partnership with a local cannabis dispensary, the blood center sought to challenge misconceptions about donor eligibility, attract first-time donors, and create community engagement around blood donation.

Serving 14 hospitals across nine counties in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin, the blood center faced challenges common throughout the industry, including fluctuating blood demand, decreasing donor participation, and difficulty connecting with younger and nontraditional donor populations.

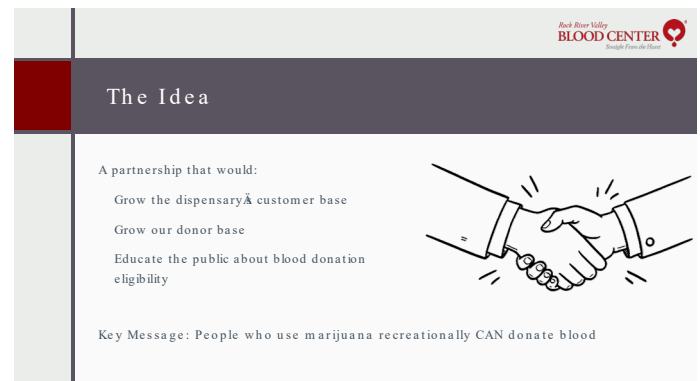
Identifying an Untapped Opportunity

Following the legalization of recreational cannabis in Illinois in 2020, dispensaries emerged as highly visible businesses with engaged customer bases. The opportunity arose when leadership at Rock River Valley Blood Center partnered with Lyfe Dispensary, a locally owned business whose owner had previously supported the blood center through other community ventures.

The partnership was built around three primary goals:

- Expanding the dispensary's customer base.
- Growing the blood center's donor base.
- Educating the public regarding blood donor eligibility.

A critical campaign message addressed a common misconception: individuals who legally use recreational marijuana can still donate blood if they meet standard donor eligibility requirements. The campaign provided clear educational messaging to help reduce confusion and encourage participation.



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Building Support and Launching the Campaign

The concept was reviewed by organizational leadership, including the CEO and Board of Directors, and received unanimous approval.

To promote the inaugural drive, the team utilized a multi-channel marketing strategy that included:

- Text message campaigns.
- Email outreach.
- Geographically targeted promotions near the dispensary.
- On-site signage.
- Traditional media outreach.
- Social media promotion.
- Dispensary customer communications and in-store advertising.

The experience was designed as a community event rather than a traditional blood drive. Donors received campaign-branded merchandise, incentive giveaways, food trucks, music, and a highly visible public experience that generated community interest and excitement.

Results Exceeded Expectations

The first drive produced far greater demand than anticipated.

First Drive Results	
Registered Donors	81
De ferrals	20
First-time donors	40
Units Collected	58

For a single bus drive on a Wednesday, these numbers surprised us.

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First Drive Results

- 81 registered donors.
- 58 units collected.
- 40 first-time donors.
- 20 deferrals.

A second drive was scheduled before the first event even occurred due to strong appointment demand. The initiative also challenged assumptions about participant demographics. Rather than attracting only younger

donors, participation spanned a wider age range, with nearly half of donors being first-time contributors.



Demand ultimately exceeded available capacity. Between 75 and 100 prospective donors were turned away because appointment and operational limits had been reached, demonstrating substantial untapped interest in the concept.

Continuous Improvement and Scaling

Following lessons learned from the first event, organizers made several operational enhancements:

- Expanded from one bloodmobile to three.
- Added larger tents and seating areas.
- Improved donor flow management.
- Reduced wait times substantially.

Second Drive Results

- 132 registrations.
- 102 units collected.
- 24 deferrals.
- Average wait time reduced to 34 minutes.
- Significantly improved donor experience.

		Second Drive Results	
		132 registrations	
		24 deferrals	
		102 units collected	
		13 first-time donors	
		Average wait time: 34 minutes (nearly cut in half!)	

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The success encouraged expansion into neighboring communities and additional partnerships with other dispensaries and suppliers. By 2025 and 2026, the model had grown to include additional locations and new branded campaigns while maintaining relationships with founding partners.

Media and Public Relations Impact

One of the campaign's most significant outcomes was its earned media success. The unconventional nature of the partnership attracted widespread attention from both local and national media.

Media coverage included:

- Local television and news coverage.
- Pickup by the Associated Press.
- Coverage across 44 radio and television outlets.



- Exposure in 21 states.
- More than 55 media mentions outside the organization's local market.

The initiative demonstrated how a creative partnership can generate awareness well beyond the immediate goals of donor recruitment.

Lessons Learned

Several important insights emerged during the campaign:

Challenge Assumptions

Organizers discovered that public perceptions about cannabis users and blood donation eligibility did not align with actual donor participation patterns. Educational messaging became a valuable component of the campaign's success.

Strong Partnerships Drive Results

The level of engagement from dispensary owners and suppliers directly influenced drive performance. Facilities with active promotion, stronger customer relationships, and greater support consistently produced better results.

Prepare for Success

The first event revealed the importance of planning for high turnout. Capacity, donor flow, seating, shade, and staffing all became critical considerations as the program expanded.

Innovation Attracts New Audiences

The campaign successfully reached nontraditional donors, generated conversations about blood donation, and introduced many individuals to donation for the first time.

Creativity Can Be a Recruitment Strategy

Perhaps the most important lesson was that effective donor recruitment sometimes comes from unexpected partnerships. By listening to community partners and embracing unconventional ideas, organizations can uncover new opportunities for growth and engagement.

	
	The Unexpected Impact Beyond collections, this program helped: • Educate new donors • Reach nontraditional audiences • Start conversations about blood donation

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