

Myth vs. Fact: Medical Marijuana



By Shonna
McGrail R
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Whether you are in support of medical marijuana or opposed to it, the voters of Massachusetts spoke in November 2012 and decided that patients should have safe access to medicinal cannabis. Since the referendum was passed the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) has been working on developing laws and regulations to build a safe and professional medical marijuana industry. As of last week, the DPH received 181 applications from organizations looking to open licensed dispensaries. Only 35 of the applicants will receive licenses and of these 35 we can expect 1 or 2 will be stationed in Bristol County. Nine organizations have applied in Bristol County to contend for those licenses.

What does this mean for New Bedford?

To find out more, I spoke with one of the applicants, Coastal Compassion, a group that has applied to open a dispensary in New Bedford. Through them I was able to learn more about the application process and to find out about the possible impact of medical marijuana on greater New Bedford. Their team was very well informed and professional and they provided me with some insightful information about the realities of medical marijuana, and how a dispensary in New Bedford can bring a lot more positive aspects than one might expect.



Myth vs. Fact: Medical Marijuana Patients are Only Interested in “Getting High”

When it comes to getting the patient perspective on medical marijuana, I was fortunate to be able to speak with JoAnne Leppanen who is the Executive Director of the Rhode Island Patient Advocacy Coalition (RIPAC) and Coastal Compassion’s Patient Education Director. Ms. Leppanen, a New Bedford resident, is the first to admit that she never expected she would be an advocate for medical marijuana patients. However, after six years of working in Rhode Island with those whose lives have been improved by safe, legal access to medicinal cannabis she honestly feels that “there are patients who would not be alive if not for medical cannabis.”

The patients Ms. Leppanen works with have a vast range of debilitating medical conditions, many of which are so serious that they are living with severe chronic pain that prevents them from being able to function in society. As Ms. Leppanen explained it, “If narcotics worked long term that would be great, we wouldn’t need medical marijuana. But narcotics have serious side effects and many people can’t take them. When they are taken for long periods of time they have intense, negative side effects. So if it weren’t for medical marijuana, these patients would be sentenced to a life of pain.”

In fact, in Ms. Lepannen's experience with RIPAC, many of the patients start off being very wary of using medical marijuana. "These are not kids looking to get high, they are most often older people who have never tried marijuana or who tried it once years ago and had a negative experience. They are looking for pain relief without the 'high'. It's really not about getting high, it's about a plant with medical properties capable of helping with nausea, pain, spasm, loss of appetite and many other health issues."

Ms. Lepannen addressed the fact that there is often a misperception that those who are recommended medical marijuana will spend their days sitting on the couch smoking marijuana and watching TV, but that the reality is the opposite. Many of the patients have lived in pain for so long that when they find a strain and form of medical cannabis that benefits them they are actually able to manage their pain and live more fully, "they can live again, relate again and become members of their families again."



Myth vs. Fact: Those Involved in the Medical Marijuana Industry are "Stoners"

There is often a negative stereotype of the type of people who

are involved in the medical marijuana industry, however, based on meeting with board members from Coastal Compassion, I found these stereotypes to be meritless. The team members were not only professional and highly informed on any topic I brought up, but they were also very dedicated to their mission of getting high quality medication to those in need of it.

Although I was only able to talk to one team, they signified to me the dedication and organization that is required to work in the medical marijuana industry. The founding team members of Coastal Compassion are all from Massachusetts and have years of experience with the medical marijuana industry through their involvement in Rhode Island's program as growers, policy advocates and businessmen. When I asked them why they got involved in the marijuana industry in the first place, they responded that every one of them knew someone who had personally benefited from medical marijuana, or who could have benefited if they had safe, legal access. Having seen the effects of medical marijuana on friends and family members who were struggling with debilitating chronic health issues, they felt that they could bring compassionate care to patients by becoming involved in Rhode Island.

RIPAC Director JoAnne Leppanen told me that before the caregivers of Coastal Compassion became involved in the Rhode Island Medical Marijuana Program, many patients were struggling to find access to the medication they needed. Some patients had such progressive illnesses that finding the right form and strain of medication was challenging.

Since any form of smoking has adverse health effects, patients are advised to use a vaporizer or take their medication in an edible or tincture form. This means that patients need to have a supplier who knows how to create effective medication in all its various forms. Additionally, different strains yield varying ratios of THC to cannabinoid ratios, which effects the reaction the patient will have to it in regards to their medical needs. Thus, the grower must have experience with

producing various effective strains. When the growers of Coastal Compassion came to Rhode Island, they were able to provide both.

“Having them form a network of Caregivers was a blessing. The feedback from patients was incredible because they were able to get them effective medication, even for the most difficult patients” said Ms. Leppanen. “They brought variety, people skills, and a genuine compassion for the patients they were servicing. I’ve seen the results of what they can do and I am amazed.”

When Massachusetts voted medical marijuana into effect, the team members of Coastal Compassion decided that seeking to operate a dispensary was their next logical step in helping patients. Since the law passed, the board members of Coastal Compassion and other applicants statewide have been preparing for the application process by expanding their teams and preparing for the financial, legal and logistical aspects of opening a dispensary.

Here’s an example of the type of teamwork and commitment that goes into applying for a Massachusetts dispensary license. The founding members of Coastal Compassion are South Coast residents with much experience in growing via the Rhode Island MMJ program, but they knew that they would need to confer with nationally respected experts in order to become effective cultivation and dispensary operators in Massachusetts. Thus, they focused on reaching out to experts locally and nationally. Coastal Compassion’s advisory and support team now includes members like RIPAC Director JoAnne Leppanen, Canna Advisor’s Jay Czarkowski who is a facility design and operations expert from Colorado, Kris Krane of 4-Front Advisors who is the nation’s leading dispensary operations expert and Chapman Dickerson of Dickerson Farms who has spent years cultivating medical marijuana. Additionally, Coastal Compassion has been working with Evans Cutler, a Massachusetts-based law firm that specializes in medical

marijuana law and Beacon Strategies Group, a Boston-based public relations expert.

Having Coastal Compassion describe to me all that went into just preparing for the application process alone made me aware of the magnitude of organizational skills and the expertise needed to become a dispensary operator.

Myth vs. Fact: A Dispensary in New Bedford Will Attract Great Rates of Crime

One of the major concerns I have heard people voice about medical marijuana dispensaries is the fear that they will attract crime. To learn more about this I brought the topic up to the team members at Coastal Compassion and found that they had some very interesting things to share.

“It’s a myth that medical dispensaries bring crime to a neighborhood” 4-Front advisor Kris Krane explained, “the reality of the matter is quite the opposite. The dispensaries follow robust security protocols such as the installation of cameras and the hiring of well-trained security staff. Therefore, it’s often found that dispensaries actually make neighborhoods and the businesses surrounding them safer.”

But where’s the proof?

When I asked this question, the team members were able to site several instances nation-wide where even city officials were able to agree that crime rates have dropped due to the opening of well-run dispensaries. For example, in Oakland, California it has been stated that illegal drug dealing has decreased notably by instead providing safe access to medicine and patient education.

Jay Czarkowski also attested to the safety of the dispensaries in Colorado saying “I’m a parent so I understand concerns about safety... in Boulder there are dozens and dozens of dispensaries but I can honestly say we’ve seen no negative

impact. In fact, crime has dropped as has teen use.”

Even Boulder County District Attorney Stan Garnett seems like he would be inclined to agree with Mr. Czarkowski if you look at his 60 Minutes interview and many other interviews he’s done in the past year. Originally Garnett was skeptical of medical marijuana’s impact on the community, but after seeing the way that the dispensary system was regulated he actually sent a letter to U.S. Attorney John Walsh stating that the dispensary system was working effectively and that the federal government should not make the prosecution of medical marijuana a priority.

Myth vs. Fact: A Dispensary in New Bedford Will Only Benefit Patients

You may be thinking that if you have no chronic medical conditions, or if you simply aren’t interested in trying medicinal marijuana, you have no reason to care about a dispensary coming to New Bedford. Interestingly enough however, a dispensary in our city will actually bring a number of positive economic and community growth opportunities.

First is the fact that a dispensary is guaranteed to generate a numerous jobs for residents. The team from Coastal Compassion emphasized to me that as individuals who grew up in the South Coast region themselves they find it critical to provide job opportunities to those living in the area. These jobs vary from delivery drivers to administrative assistants to security guards.

Another way that a dispensary in New Bedford will positively impact the community is through outreach. For example, when speaking with the team they told me about their plan to set up the Coastal Compassion Community Foundation if their application is accepted. This nonprofit foundation would allow them to take a portion of the earnings from the dispensary and funnel it directly back into the greater New Bedford area. The

Foundation will “provide maximum impact on the local community in the areas of public education, alcohol, tobacco and substance abuse education, crime prevention and public safety, the marine environment, and green energy.”

In Closing

There are a lot of factors at play with the siting of cultivation centers and dispensaries within the City, and the eventual selection of teams. There is clearly a lot of interest in the emerging industry surrounding medical marijuana and it will be interesting to see how the process plays out. If you have any questions about the process, please comment below and I will try to keep New Bedford Guide readers up to date as new information emerges!