

Lighting Up Legally In The Constitution State

By Karena Garrity

A historic event took place in the state of Connecticut when the clock struck 10 a.m. on January 10th and residents, for the first time, could walk into a marijuana dispensary and purchase an array of marijuana products, legally, for recreational purposes. On that day, Connecticut followed the path forward, forged by several states before it including Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New York.

Marijuana, cannabis, weed, joints, vapes, edibles, tinctures and topicals are all legal now thanks to legislation passed in June of 2021. Governor Ned Lamont officially signed legislation that put an end to the prohibition of recreational marijuana, which legalized the possession of cannabis in the state for adults 21 and older. This created the outline for regulated adult-use cannabis to be sold legally in the Nutmeg State. State law dictates that, “recreational sales are limited to 1/4 ounce of cannabis flower, or its equivalent, per transaction, among products offered.” Seven of the nine licensed dispensaries within Connecticut opened their doors on January 10th, including; Affinity- New Haven, RISE, formerly Bluepoint Wellness of Connecticut in Branford, Fine Fettle Dispensary – Newington, Fine Fettle Dispensary – Stamford, Fine Fettle Dispensary – Willimantic, The Botanist – Montville and Willow Brook Wellness - Meriden. (Still River Wellness in Torrington and The Botanist in Danbury will have delayed opening). RISE Dispensary, located at 471 E. Main Street, Branford is owned by Green Thumb Industries, which also owns Advanced Grow Labs in West Haven, where product for RISE Dispensary is grown.

RISE (when it was Bluepoint Wellness of Connecticut) was among the first medical marijuana dispensaries in the state and has been in operation since 2014 when the medical program began. It is one of the dispensaries that was lucky enough to secure a coveted license to sell adult-use marijuana and according to Dave Bodurtha, the Commercial General Manager of the Northeast for Green Thumb Industries, “More Americans are choosing cannabis for healthier happier lives.” He added, “We are thrilled to be part of this community. Cannabis sales bring positivity to the community.”

Evidence of that began the very first day of operation, with profits from RISE donated to the Black Business Alliance out of Milford. In addition, jobs and tax revenue has been brought to the area because of this business. Bodurtha explained that RISE Dispensary has hired an additional 60 employees to help with the launch of recreational sales at the store and another 40 jobs have been added to the company's growing facility in West Haven. "These are good jobs that pay above minimum wage and offer benefits," said Bodurtha. "In addition, the community benefits from the additional taxes sales generated." And those sales are reportedly booming. According to the State Department of Consumer Protection, "the state eclipsed \$2 million in cannabis product sales during the first eight days of operation."

But make no mistake, the cannabis business in Connecticut is not cheap for the dispensary owners or the consumers. Bodurtha, who also oversees operations in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, explained that Connecticut has the highest licensing fees to operate in the entire country. According to information from Connecticut Chapter 420h regulation of adult-use cannabis, "The license conversion fee for a dispensary facility to become a hybrid retailer (which would allow the dispensary to sell for both medical and recreational use) shall be one million dollars, except as provided in section 21a-420u. Similarly, the license conversion fee for a (medical marijuana) producer (wishing to convert their license to include recreational marijuana) and engage in the adult use cannabis market shall be three million dollars, except as provided in section 21a-420u." Those are some hefty startup costs.

Cannabis is also not cheap for the consumer. Currently in Connecticut, in addition to the 6.35 percent sales tax, there is an additional three percent town cannabis tax and another additional tax based on the THC content of the product. However, given the full parking lot and busy atmosphere at RISE, price is not a deterrent to customers. However, although marijuana is decriminalized in Connecticut it remains an illegal drug under federal law. Marijuana is classified as a Schedule 1 drug under the Controlled Substances Act of 1970. And, although you can legally purchase marijuana and possess it in this state there are restrictions on where you can use it. RISE's website (which contains a plethora of information) explains that, "Each town/city may have its own rules and restrictions on where cannabis can be consumed. Further, cannabis use will be prohibited in state parks and on state beaches and waters and is generally

prohibited in moving vehicles, school premises and playgrounds, hotels, Department of Corrections facilities, halfway houses, and in workplaces.”

So, what can one expect if they are heading to the RISE Dispensary to purchase marijuana for the first time for recreational use? First off, security is paramount for this business, with security guards outside and inside. Don't forget to bring your license or valid form of identification. You will be asked for it before entering the building and your identification will be scanned. Once past that checkpoint you will walk through a vestibule and enter a very clean, storefront, filled with friendly, helpful employees, kiosks, check-out areas and an onsite ATM, because this is a cash-only business. No product is in eyesight. Employees happily point you in the direction of the correct line, medical or recreational. Then you will choose what you would like to purchase from one of the touchscreen kiosks. There are a variety of choices including Indica and Sativa, hybrid and CBD varieties of vapes, flowers, pre-rolled joints, tinctures, topicals, concentrates and edibles to name a few. Once your order has been placed, you move on to one of the 13 “budtenders”, you give your name and your order is brought forward from the back room where the product is securely stored.

RISE is open seven days a week and currently also offers the opportunity to purchase online for pick up. Their hours are Monday through Saturday, 9 a.m. to 8 pm and Sunday 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. For those who have been waiting for cannabis sales to begin, have fun, be responsible and enjoy!