

MARIJUANA

'Bigger, faster, stronger': Two weeks in, and NJ legal weed isn't slowing down



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The first two weeks of legal weed sales in New Jersey are in the books, and the state's nascent cannabis industry shows no signs of slowing down.

The 12 medical marijuana dispensaries selling marijuana for recreational use still see regular lines, though far shorter than the hours-long waits that faced many on April 21, the first day of sales.

More than 12,000 customers visited dispensaries on the first day, and Curaleaf Regional Vice President of Retail Adam John said the number of transactions and customers at its flagship Bellmawr dispensary have continued to grow in the two weeks since.

"We had our team telling us what they thought we could expect," John said. "But what's been different is just the sheer volume in New Jersey. That's something nothing could prepare us for."

Asked to compare New Jersey's opening to other states, John replied simply, "Bigger, faster, stronger."

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At Curaleaf, managers tinkered with operations in the first few days to cut down on wait times — such as changing the menu navigation and distributing more tablets to customers on line, so their purchase would be ready by the time they got to the front of the line.

"The amount of new customers we're seeing is astounding," John said.

The early reviews have mostly been positive, with customers lauding the dispensaries' efficiency and the general cleanliness of the retail environment, which often resembles something closer to an Apple store, with tablets for cash registers and most of the weed hidden behind closed doors.

The main bone of contention has been the price, which has mostly hovered around \$65 for an eighth-ounce. One Google reviewer said that price was more than double what he paid for marijuana from an illegal dealer

"This is why the black market will continue to be #1," the review said.

But the jury is still out from the dispensaries' longest-tenured customers — the medical marijuana patients who, until April 21, were their only customers.

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Medical marijuana patients interviewed by the USA TODAY NETWORK seemed torn about the impact of adult use marijuana on their ability to acquire medicinal cannabis.

Access itself hasn't been an issue. As a condition of their approval to sell marijuana for recreational use, dispensaries must provide patients with their own check-in and checkout lines, registers and parking areas, as well as at least 14 patient-only hours of operation per week.

What has been an issue for patients is selection. Mount Laurel resident and medical marijuana patient Doug Cooper noticed that his usual dispensary, Zen Leaf in Lawrence Township, stopped carrying strains of KindTree, his chosen brand that is grown by TerrAscend, which operates two Apothecarium dispensaries in New Jersey.

Now, Cooper drives two hours to the Apothecarium in Phillipsburg to get the strain that helps ease his spinal stenosis, post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety.

"I rely on this medication so I can be comfortable, be able to perform my job and not be on disability," Cooper said. "I feel like the state has neglected the medical program. It's like telling a diabetic you have to drive two hours for insulin. How is that fair to someone who needs access to medication?"

The New Jersey Cannabis Regulatory Commission has threatened to penalize any medical marijuana dispensary flouting its rules for patient supply and access.

"We expected sales to be substantial and the data shows that the market is effectively serving both adult-use consumers and patients," CRC Executive Director Jeff Brown said in a statement. "We continue to monitor inventory and access for patients and are prepared to take enforcement action against any ATC that does not meet the requirements for patient access and supply."

Issues like those faced by Cooper all fall back to simple supply and demand calculations: Twelve medical marijuana dispensaries are selling recreationally, but there are only 23 total for the state's 130,000 medical marijuana patients.

Relief is expected eventually, as the CRC has issued dozens of medical marijuana dispensary licenses over the last few months, and the commission is expected to approve more medical marijuana dispensaries to begin recreational sales at their monthly meetings.

The next CRC meeting is scheduled for May 24.

Mike Davis has spent the last decade covering New Jersey local news, marijuana legalization, transportation and a little bit of everything else. He's won a few awards that make his parents very proud. Contact him at mdavis@gannettnj.com or [@byMikeDavis](https://twitter.com/byMikeDavis) on Twitter.