

Marijuana dispensaries setting up shop

Two medical marijuana dispensaries coming to Nassau County

By **BRIAN STIEGLITZ, DANIELLE AGOGLIA, and NAKHEEM GRANT**

bstieglitz@liherald.com, dagoglia@liherald.com, ngrant@liherald.com

Five medical marijuana dispensaries will open in New York, with two to come to Nassau County, according to an Aug. 1 announcement by the State Department of Health.

The objective in adding five more dispensaries to the existing five is to increase accessibility to medical marijuana, alleviate the cost burden for patients by encouraging corporate competition and create more marijuana products, department spokesman Howard Zucker wrote in a release.

Fiorello Pharmaceuticals and PalliatEch NY will receive licenses to distribute in Nassau County. Also coming to New York will be New York Canna, Valley Agriceuticals and Citiva Medical.

"We're gauging the situation as we go," said Gov. Andrew Cuomo, adding that the need for more dispensaries came with the increasing number of certified patients since New York legalized medical marijuana in 2014.

"My opinion is that we are doing the right thing, and there is a need for this particular type of drug," said State

Assemblyman Charles Lavine, a Democrat from Glen Cove. "It's being regulated in our state, and it's going to help a substantial number of people."

But not all are quick to embrace medical marijuana. "As we are seeing in other states, legalization has caused some practitioners and licensed agencies to prescribe medical marijuana for the most trivial conditions and are using marijuana for situations in which its efficacy hasn't been established," said Dr. Sharon Harris, psychologist and executive director of Glen Cove SAFE.

SAFE, Substance Abuse Free Environment, is a public-private community partnership that provides alcohol- and drug-prevention services. It is the only certified substance abuse-prevention agency in Glen Cove, emphasizing intervention and education.

"While medical marijuana will be prescribed for adults, the community has to be alerted to potential abuse by youth,"

Harris explained. "There is some evidence that marijuana might have harmful neurological effects and, quite clearly, behavioral effects in children and adolescents."

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DR. SHARON HARRIS

Executive director, Glen Cove SAFE

Harris noted that while she doubts practitioners would prescribe marijuana for children outside of unusual situations, children could abuse their parents' prescribed medications. Marijuana joins other prescribed medications as part of SAFE's "Lock Up Your Meds" initiative.

Assemblyman Michael Montesano, a Republican from Glen Head, said that he could not support marijuana dispensaries because they violate federal law. Doctors, he said, cannot prescribe marijuana for medical use. They can, however, offer "recommendations" or "referrals" under the federal prescription prohibition.

"At any given time, the federal government could step in here and prosecute anyone and everyone involved with these dispensaries," Monte-

sano said. "As a state legislator, I don't feel that we're supposed to be approving laws that are in direct violation of a federal law and the doctors who issue the certifications. We're begging for a problem."

Assemblyman Ed Ra, a Republican from Franklin Square, is also concerned about possible violations of federal law, but he sees the potential benefits of adding more dispensaries. "People probably aren't going to drive over an hour to get to a dispensary," Ra said. "It's clear that what was out there in terms of dispensaries was not adequate to cover the demand. Additional dispensaries make a lot of sense."

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, New York allows the distribution of medical marijuana at dispensaries, but ingested doses cannot contain more than 10 milligrams of THC, and the product cannot be smoked.

As of Aug. 1, there were 25,736 patients certified for medical marijuana treatment. That number has increased by 10,744, or 72 percent, since March, when the Department of Health added chronic pain as an eligible condition, according to Zucker.

None of the registered organizations will grow cannabis on Long Island, and dispensaries' locations have yet to be disclosed.