



AP Photo/Elliot Spagat

Employee Joshua Wilson counts cash at the Golden State Greens marijuana dispensary on Wednesday in San Diego. A few dozen California shops have cleared a final hurdle to sell marijuana for recreational use starting today. Regulators worked through the weekend to grant more licenses.

In California, pot shops roll out hoopla

By ELLIOT SPAGAT
Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Live music. Free T-shirts. A “Fweedom” celebration with mystery prize boxes worth up to \$500, and a shot at a behind-the-scenes tour.

Marijuana legalization arrives today in California with lots of hoopla, but only a handful of cities will initially have retail outlets ready to sell recreational pot.

By Thursday afternoon, California had issued only 42 retail licenses. Another 150 applications were pending and regulators planned to work a second straight weekend to review them.

Los Angeles and San Francisco were late to approve local regulations, meaning no recreational pot shops there will open their doors today.

The lucky few outlets with licenses — mainly in San Diego, the San Francisco Bay Area, Palm Springs area and Santa Cruz — think they have an edge being first out of the gate.

But excitement about California joining the growing list of states and Washington, D.C., with legal recreational weed is tempered with the stresses of ensuring shelves are stocked in the face of uncertain demand.

The state issued its first 20 retail licenses two weeks ago and an additional 22 trickled out since, some for already established medical marijuana businesses that have thrived in California for two decades and will continue.

Alex Traverso, a spokesman for the California Bureau of Cannabis Control, said a dozen employees were vetting applications to “issue as many licenses as we can” in the coming days.

The temporary permits represent just a sliver of the thousands of licenses expected to eventually be issued for retail recreational sales. Local permits are a prerequisite for the state licenses, and many cities — including Los Angeles, San Francisco and Long Beach — have yet to issue any local rules, putting huge swaths of the state on the sidelines for opening day.

The Palm Springs area had nine of the state’s first retail licenses, including seven in Cathedral City, population 54,000.

San Diego had eight. Santa Cruz and San Jose had four each and others were scattered around the San Francisco Bay Area and the state’s northern reaches.

An outlet known as Caliva in San Jose is promoting the “Fweedom” celebration today with the prize boxes and exclusive tours of its growing areas, along with massages, acupuncture, waffle desserts and music with “mellow beats.”

A county supervisor will attend a 7 a.m. ribbon-cutting ceremony at KindPeoples in Santa Cruz. Its chief executive, Khalil Moutawakkil, said weed has long

been “a huge part” of the culture of the oceanfront college town.

Berkeley Patients Group, which opened as a medical marijuana dispensary in 1999 and has received a permit for recreational sales, expects lines around the block to mark opening day. The mayor of the city that includes the University of California, Berkeley campus is expected at a ribbon-cutting ceremony at 6 a.m.

“You’ll see the people who have been consumers for decades and they were for legalization back in the ‘60s,” said Sean Luse, chief operating officer. “But you’re also going to see a more mainstream group of people who were waiting for the green light.”

Harborside is planning brass bands at its locations in Oakland and San Jose, with flags and T-shirts for the first 100 people in line.

A few outlets with recreational licenses are passing on the hoopla.

For them, excitement at being first out of the gate is tempered with the stresses of complying with new regulations.

Golden State Greens, with a modest storefront amid car repair shops and budget hotels in San Diego, houses a bustling business that has sold marijuana for medical purposes since 2015. It will open its doors at 7 a.m. today, like it does every other day of the year. After California voters approved recreational weed last year, the shop changed its name from Point Loma Patients Consumer Cooperative, reflecting its ambitions for a broader clientele.

“We’re planning for the worst and hoping for the best,” said marketing director Alex Leon. “There are a lot of unknown factors but we’re prepared.”

Gary Cherlin, chief executive of Desert Organic Solutions Collective in North Palm Springs, received holiday news of his recreational sales permit as he devised promotional packages with hotels aimed at tourists who come for warm winters. He said being among the first shops to sell recreational pot means less competition.

“I don’t know how many more are coming but they don’t have a lot of time left,” he said.

Mount Shasta Patients Collective, which opened three years ago in the northern part of the state as a medical dispensary, has already turned away people coming for recreational pot.

Others with medical marijuana cards have been stocking up ahead of price increases expected after recreational weed is legal.

“We’ll have all hands on deck,” general manager Austin Freeman said of opening day. “It could be really hectic.”

Associated Press writers Janie Har in San Francisco and Amanda Lee Myers in Los Angeles contributed to this report.



AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

A large homeless encampment is formed in the Santa Ana Civic Center in October in Santa Ana, Calif. The number of homeless living in Orange County has climbed 8 percent over the last two years. The increase is driven by soaring housing costs, though a drug addiction crisis and need for mental health services are also factors.

As West Coast fights homelessness, kindness is sometimes contentious

By AMY TAXIN and
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Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Mohammed Aly does not see why he shouldn’t try to ease the lives of Orange County’s homeless. But the authorities — and many of his neighbors — disagree.

Aly, a 28-year-old lawyer and activist, has been arrested three times as he campaigned on behalf of street people. Recently, he was denied permission to install portable toilets on a dried-up riverbed, site of an encampment of roughly 400 homeless.

“It is a question of basic empathy,” he said.

But his detractors are engaged in a debate up and down the West Coast as the region struggles to cope with a rising tide of homelessness. They say Aly and other well-meaning residents who provide the homeless with tents, toilets and hot meals are enabling them to remain unsheltered.

And they note, nuisances like trash and unsanitary conditions fester and aberrant behavior continues.

In California, the San Diego County community of El Cajon passed a measure that curtails feeding the homeless, citing health concerns. Los Angeles city officials have closed and re-opened restrooms for those on Skid Row amid similar controversies.

The issue is hotly debated in Orange County. In the seaside enclave of Dana Point, neighbors fear a nightly meal is drawing homeless to a state beach where teens play beach volleyball and families picnic and surf. And on the riverbed 30 miles north, a van fitted with shower stalls pulls up to help those living in the trash-strewn encampment, which neighbors worry is becoming more entrenched in an area where they once jogged and biked.

“There’s no doubt that giving them stuff there prevents them from a desire to move,” said Shaun Dove, a 46-year-old soon-to-be retired policeman who lives less than a mile away.

The number of homeless living in Orange County has climbed 8 percent over the last two years. In the United States, homelessness rose slightly in the last year to nearly 554,000, pushed up largely by increases on the West Coast, federal data shows. The increase is driven by soaring housing costs, as well as a drug crisis and need for mental health services.

Advocates say the homeless have become more visible as police have cracked down on rules barring camping, driving people to spots like the riverbed, which is county property.

Everybody knows the solution is more housing; there aren’t enough beds available in a county with a median home price near \$700,000.

In Dana Point, the nightly meals began more than two decades ago at local churches



Homeless people wait in line for a free meal in December in Dana Point, Calif. The number of homeless living in Orange County has climbed 8 percent over the last two years. Advocates say the homeless population has become more visible as police have cracked down on rules barring camping, driving people from parks and bus benches to a few centralized locations, such as the flood control channel along the Santa Ana River in Anaheim.



Homeless tents are pitched on a sidewalk in the Skid Row area of downtown Los Angeles in November as tables are set up on the street to serve dinner to homeless people at the Los Angeles Mission’s Annual Thanksgiving Dinner Celebration. Goodhearted neighbors heartbroken over the rising number of homeless in their communities are dishing out hot meals, providing mobile showers and handing out sandwiches to those in need, hoping they can make a difference.



Two police officers, Eric Meier, right, and Curtis Bynum from the Anaheim Police Department’s homeless outreach team walk through a homeless encampment set up outside Angel Stadium on Dec. 19 in Anaheim, Calif. The event was organized by nonprofit organizations and agencies to offer services to homeless people in Orange County.

but were moved to the beach parking lot after a late night stabbing between two homeless residents.

The homeless say as much as they appreciate the hot meals, the food isn’t keeping them on the streets.

“It doesn’t help me tomorrow. It doesn’t,” said a 55-year-old man who refused to give his name. “But it helps me today.”

Volunteers say the homeless are drawn to beaches because of the open space and access to water and restrooms and that feeding people can build trust

and lead them to additional services.

But Brian Brandt, a 55-year-old lawyer, doesn’t let his six children go down to the beach alone after seeing volatile outbursts among the homeless and frequent police calls.

“I don’t want to be seen as a bad guy — ‘OK, look at this heartless dude,’” he said. “I don’t feel safe. I don’t feel like my kids are safe.”

Toni Nelson, who co-founded a neighborhood group, is also critical of the meals. She has joined with housing advocates to try to

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raise money to house the homeless with ties to the community, figuring if about a third of the city’s residents chip in \$68 they can cover much of the need for a year.

So far, dozens have signed up to give. But they still have a long way to go.

Robert Marbut, a consultant on homelessness, believes it’s misguided to provide housing or other services without heavy incentives for recipients to be in treatment programs for mental health problems, addiction or other issues.

“Anytime you give out services without treatment,” Marbut said, “that’s enabling, period. ... You’ve got to serve the food in a place where mental health is being provided.”

People say they ended up at the riverbed encampment for different reasons ranging from drug addiction to a lost job.

Many nearby residents said their neighborhoods have suffered since the camp has grown. Hypodermic needles have been found in the park and shopping carts rattle on otherwise quiet streets.

Anaheim officials said any aid should be part of a broader effort to help people find a way out of the riverbed. “The goal shouldn’t be to make it slightly more comfortable there to live that way but rather, how can we get those folks to a better place?” said city spokesman Mike Lyster.

Orange County has shelter beds but they largely fill up. And many homeless said they don’t like a shelter curfew or rules barring police and prefer their privacy, even outdoors.

County authorities say they want to clear the riverbed and have provided those living there with showers and case management services to help those who want it.