

California pot: Smoke 'em (or eat 'em) if you can get 'em

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) — It wasn't exactly reefer madness Monday as California launched the first legal retail sales of marijuana, but those who could find the drug celebrated the historic day, lining up early for ribbon cuttings, freebies and offerings ranging from joints to gummy bears to weed with names like Red Dragon.

Jeff Deakin, 66, his wife Mary and their dog waited in the cold all night to be first in a line of 100 people when Harborside dispensary, a longtime medical pot shop in Oakland, opened at 6 a.m. and offered early customers joints for a penny and free T-shirts that read "Flower to the People — Cannabis for All."

"It's been so long since others and myself could walk into a place where you could feel safe and secure and be able to get something that was good without having to go to the back alley," Deakin said. "This is kind of a big deal for everybody."

Harborside founder Steve DeAngelo used a giant pair of scissors to cut a green ribbon, declaring, "With these scissors I dub thee free," before ringing up the first customer at a cash register.

Sales were brisk in the shops lucky to score one of the roughly 100 state licenses issued so far, but customers in some of the state's largest cities were out of luck. Los Angeles and San Francisco hadn't authorized shops in time to get state licenses and other cities, such as Riverside and Fresno, blocked sales altogether.

Chicago sees 2017 drop in homicides, shootings

CHICAGO (AP) — Chicago ended 2017 with fewer homicides than the year before, but gang violence in the city's most dangerous neighborhoods kept the total number of killings above the 600 mark for only the second time in more than a decade.

The Chicago Police Department released statistics Monday that show the number of homicides fell from 771 in 2016 to 650 last year. The number of shootings dropped from 3,550 to 2,785 during the same period.

Although the drops were significant, the homicide total in a repeat of 2016 eclipsed the number of killings in New York City and Los Angeles combined.

"You still have to start with the fact that 600 people dead in Chicago is a hell of a lot of people to be dead in one year," said the Rev. Marshall Hatch, whose church is in one of the most violent neighborhoods on the city's West Side.

Still, the drops — and the reasons behind the lower numbers — have police and others optimistic that some of their efforts will lead to more declines over the next year. Chief among those efforts will be the expansion of the high-tech strategies and equipment to fight crime, including devices that pinpoint where gunshots are fired.

Feds employ early warning system in opioid fight

PITTSBURGH (AP) — The pain clinic tucked into the corner of a low-slung suburban strip mall was an open secret.

Patients would travel hundreds of miles to see Dr. Andrzej Zielke, eager for what authorities described as a steady flow of prescriptions for the kinds of powerful painkillers that ushered the nation into its worst drug crisis in history.

At least one of Zielke's patients died of an overdose, and prosecutors say others became so dependent on oxycodone and other opioids they would crowd his

office, sometimes sleeping in the waiting room. Some peddled their pills near tumble-down storefronts and on blighted street corners in addiction-plagued parts of Allegheny County, where deaths by drug overdose reached record levels last year.

But Robert Cessar, a longtime federal prosecutor, was unaware of Zielke until Justice Department officials handed him a binder of data that, he said, confirmed what pill-seekers from as far away as Ohio and Virginia already knew. The doctor who offered ozone therapy and herbal pain remedies was also prescribing highly addictive narcotics to patients who didn't need them, according to an indictment charging

him with conspiracy and unlawfully distributing controlled substances.

Zielke denied he was overprescribing, telling AP he practiced alternative medicine and many of his patients stopped seeing him when he cut down on pain pills.

Families from Florida, NY die in Costa Rica plane crash

SAN JOSE, Costa Rica (AP) — Costa Rican investigators are looking into what caused a charter aircraft to crash in woods in the country's northwest soon after takeoff, killing two crewmembers and 10 U.S. citizens, including families

from New York and Florida.

The families from the New York City suburb of Scarsdale and from Belleair, Florida, accounted for nine of the dead and were part of a tour organized by Berkeley, California-based Backroads. Their American guide was the 10th U.S. victim.

Costa Rican officials had said they were still seeking to establish the names of the Americans who died when the Nature Air plane went down at midday Sunday in Guanacaste. But back at home, stunned family and friends began to confirm the victims' identities.

A family in the suburbs of New York City said five of the dead were relatives on vacation. They identified them as Bruce and Irene Steinberg and their sons

Matthew, William and Zachary, all of Scarsdale.

In unusual step, victims told of trashed rape kits

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. (AP) — When Veronica was raped more than 13 years ago, she says neither the police nor the hospital staff believed her story that a longtime friend attacked her while his mother was in the next room.

"I was treated like a female crying wolf," said Veronica, who says the man raped her while she was unconscious. She believes he drugged her drink.

She was surprised, earlier this year, when she got a call from the initial investigating officer, John Somerindyke,

who apologized for how she was treated and for something that Veronica didn't yet know: Her rape kit was among 333 kits that Fayetteville police had thrown away.

Years after the kits were discarded, Fayetteville police began working with a crisis group to call the victims and tell them what happened.

The Joyful Heart Foundation, which works to end the backlogs, says Fayetteville police may stand alone in the effort to contact survivors about trashed rape kits. "I don't know of any others that have taken it on like Fayetteville has by apologizing to survivors and to communities and trying to do what they can to fix it," said Ilsa Knecht, director of advocacy and policy for the foundation.

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