

# A TALE OF TWO CALIFORNIA DISPENSARIES

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## Key points:

- CA has 215 Dispensaries
- All Dispensaries in CA are nonprofits – AG opinion
- Patients are allowed to grow (by county ordinance)
- San Francisco has 28 Dispensaries (some on the same block)
- Local law enforcement has been assisted in solving neighborhood crimes
- Caring about the communities they serve has led to the success of these two dispensaries.

## **Peace In Medicine - Sebastopol, CA** - <http://www.peaceinmedicine.org/home.htm>

In preparation for a trip to California, I made arrangements to visit a medical marijuana dispensary in Sebastopol called Peace In Medicine\* that has been operating since 2007.

On Tuesday, July 22, 2014, I walked into the facility that resembles a doctor's office and is located in a house-like building with a porch/lanai in the back. I was greeted very professionally by a woman who asked if I was a new patient. (If I were, the process would be to hand over my identification and my doctor's recommendation, which the receptionist would then verify by calling the doctor directly while I filled out what looked like a standard new patient questionnaire). After verification, the person is given the Peace In Medicine member handbook.

The reception area has a literature table with all sorts of information about community events, yoga classes, and other helpful information. The staff understands that some people may be nervous about entering a dispensary therefore it is set up as a warm and welcoming environment where everyone wants to help the patient find the best relief for their ailments.

I asked many questions about how they got started, the type of dispensary Peace In Medicine is (for-profit, non-profit or government-run), and their interactions with the community and law enforcement. I learned that an AG's opinion states that all dispensaries in CA are non-profits.

California has 215 dispensaries and allows patients to grow on their own medicine as well. The California system is set up to protect anonymity. This led to the question of why the Hawai`i Department of Health would need a database when the recommendation could be verified with the patient's physician, especially when Hawai`i's Constitution is particularly strong on privacy.

Peace In Medicine has no cap on the number of patients and to date have approximately 60,000 patients. All patients must be at least 18 years old. This is verified by requiring identification and a state recommendation in order to enter.

How do they find/hire staff for the various aspects of Peace In Medicine? The person must be presentable, articulate and pass a complete background check. I asked if they would hire a person with a felony conviction. They replied that after a complete check to determine that the person would present no problem, they would.

After meeting with the knowledgeable administrators of the facility, whose backgrounds are in health administration and biology, we were taken through the entire operation.

First the retail section that is behind a locked door and not visible from the reception area. Inside the retail area they had two counters with product. Each sample is labeled to educate the patient on the health effects of each strain (i.e. addresses nausea, reduces swelling, etc.). There is also plenty of information on a bookshelf, such as:

- About Lab testing and information about CBDs
- Ask Your Doctor if CBD is Right for You
- Understanding the Effects of Cannabis on the Your Body and Mind
- The Endocannabinoid System
- Eating Cannabis for the First Time
- Literature on Terpenes with a Chart
- Literature on Cannababinoids

Next there is the weighing room where two employees are responsible for weighing, packaging and labeling the products after they are received from the quality assurance/quality control division.

Product that is brought in is tested in a lab and then goes through another series of tests. We asked how many samples of products they receive and how many of those are accepted. The answer was for every hundred products they receive and test, only 5 or 6 are accepted.

Next was a tour of the farm from which Peace In Medicine receives about 30-40% of their product. The farm is behind a security gate. This extremely well-run farm has several greenhouses growing different strains of cannabis. The law is posted on big boards in every greenhouse. When applicants are interviewed they are asked if they know that cannabis is still illegal in federal law. We were told that all employees responded that they believed in the plant to help people and they were willing to take the risk.

What was most impressive was the professionalism of both PEACE IN MEDICINE Dispensary and the farm. Everyone understood what their role was and could articulate their responsibilities clearly and concisely. This kind of openness was refreshing and non-threatening for patients of all ages. We observed a very diverse clientele while at the Dispensary.

Peace In Medicine also has another dispensary in Santa Rosa that has been in operation since 2010. Both PEACE IN MEDICINE locations have established themselves as a vital part of their communities by participating in community events (tabling, booths) and supporting the community in various ways.

**San Francisco Patient & Resource Center (Sparc) – San Francisco, CA - <http://sparcsf.org/>**

San Francisco has 28 dispensaries. We asked the people at Peace In Medicine for an introduction to a dispensary in an urban area and they were kind enough to make an appointment with the manager of the sparc dispensary.

This dispensary is right in the heart of San Francisco on Mission Street. It has won architectural awards for its clean and spacious design. The goal was to make it a welcoming place that women would not be afraid to enter alone.

There is a gentleman who sits outside the dispensary (a nice looking storefront) to check the identification and cards of the patients. Once admitted, the person is greeted at the reception desk by a welcoming staff member. If new, the patient is given a new patient form to fill out while the physician's recommendation is verified. After verification, the patient is given the sparc member handbook.

Then the patient proceeds to one of the three identical retail counters where the product is displayed with signs revealing the THC percentage and the CBD percentage of the different strains of cannabis. There are a range of other cannabis products like creams and salves and edible products from chocolate bars to mints and cookies. All packages are labeled with instructions and the THC content.

Like Peace in Medicine, sparc receives many samples of different strains and after extensive testing, accepts only 2 or 3 products to sell.

Unlike Peace in Medicine, sparc allows patients to use the product on site.

The atmosphere is professional (although different from the doctor's office style) and the dispensary is clean, well-managed by a person who understands the mission and marketing of this medicine to patients, with a staff that is trained by Americans for Safe Access. We were told that they pay a living wage, provide health benefits, and every employee enjoys a day off on their birthday.

A few doors down from sparc, there is a dispensary in another storefront with blacked-out windows and a grate in front; completely opposite from the clean and professional sparc dispensary.

## **CONCLUSION**

It was important to see two different types of dispensaries and in two different locations. Both of these dispensaries are well-run and very professional with committed and knowledgeable staff who want to help patients get the relief they are seeking.

The claims about increased crime and drug use that Hawai'i's law enforcement has been touting appear to be centered in Los Angeles before any regulations were in place.

When asked about the interaction with law enforcement, both of the dispensaries we visited, said that their relationship was very good because they followed the letter of the law. Both even said that the police have used their video surveillance cameras to help solve crimes in their neighborhoods.

Both dispensaries emphasized that their product was from local farmers.

Dispensaries in Hawai'i, sourcing product from small local farms could be a big boon to Hawai'i's small farmers. As the farm we visited made clear, this is an agricultural product just as anything else sold at a farmer's market. It takes science, knowledge, and a commitment to make it work.