

HOLYOKE

HCC opens 1st cannabis education center in state

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Holyoke Community College officials announced they are opening the first cannabis education center in the state and will teach the first class in November.

The announcement was made in front of a crowd of about 75 people, some of whom have opened businesses in the fledgling industry and others who wanted to learn more about working with cannabis. It was followed by a panel discussion with industry experts, including owners of some of the first legal adult-use cannabis businesses in the state.

"It promises opportunity for many and it promises opportunity for many who have not had access to opportunity before," said Jeff Hayden vice president of business and community services for the college.

The Cannabis Education Center is being opened in partnership with the Cannabis Community Care and Research Network and with the help of several local cannabis business owners who have agreed to offer on-site

internships that will be part of the program, he said.

"It will be a huge step up for us," said Mark Zatoryka, chief executive officer of INSA, which opened one of the first Massachusetts recreational cannabis businesses in November in Northampton.

Because anyone who works in the industry must pass background checks and be certified through a state process, it costs the business about \$1,000 and takes six to eight weeks before a candidate can begin working, he said.

Finding someone who has already gone through an educational program and is ready to work in the industry will ease hiring difficulties and prevent turnover, he said.

"The biggest challenge is finding the right people. It is a really intense business," said Meg Sanders, chief executive officer of Canna Provisions which has a business in Lee and is expecting to open a second business in Holyoke soon.

Sanders said her employees range in age from 21 to 80, and one of her best workers is a man in his 70s. Her company invests significantly in training employees especially in retail.

The Cannabis Education Center will begin with four

certificate-based workforce programs that will include 96 hours of instruction stretched over six weeks. While 46 hours will be classroom time on campus, students will spend the other half learning hands-on at internships at local businesses, Hayden said.

Registration will begin as soon as this week, and Hayden said he hopes to have a total of about 100 people enrolled in the different programs by late spring.

The courses will focus on four different jobs with the class for a cannabis culinary assistant starting first in January. The other three, cannabis retail or patient advocate, cannabis cultivation and cannabis extraction technician will all be rolled out by this spring, Hayden said.

Some of those classes will incorporate skills the college already teaches, for example OSHA safety regulations will be tied into cannabis cultivation and Serve Safe courses will be tied into the culinary class, he said.

The center is also running five additional entrepreneur courses designed for people eligible to apply for licenses from the state Cannabis Control Commission under its social equity license program set up for people

who have been convicted of a crime related to cannabis or have been negatively impacted by the drug war.

Those classes will begin with a two-session all-day class that will run on Nov. 23 and 24 and will focus on business plans and training.

Hayden said he hopes

eventually the college will be able to expand that into an entrepreneur course for anyone interested in beginning their own business.

Registration will begin as soon as this week, and Hayden said he hopes to have a total of about 100 people enrolled in the different programs by late spring.

The cost of the programs has not been determined yet since the college is working with partners to set a tuition amount. The average cost of certificate programs at Holyoke Community College is around \$2,000 but costs can be defrayed by scholarships and by business partners, he said.

Because the college's workforce development programs are designed to reach out to people who are seeking a job or trying to

get better at their existing job, Hayden said the college works to keep the cost as affordable as possible, understanding those who are unemployed or underemployed have very limited money.

People can learn more about the programs on the center's website cannabiseducationcenter.org.

"There is great opportunity for those looking for jobs in the workforce," said Marion McNabb, chief executive officer for Cannabis Community Care and Research.

Currently there are 196 approved cannabis businesses that are operating in the state and 377 businesses with applications that are awaiting approval from the state Cannabis Control Commission, she said.

Most of the licenses issued so far are in retail, manufacturing and cultivation. There are great opportunities to begin businesses or work in other areas of the industry where far fewer licenses have been sought including testing labs, transportation and micro-businesses, she said.

"We are partnering with testing labs," McNabb said, adding the Holyoke Community College program may eventually expand to include a course for people interested in working in labs.

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MARION MCNABB, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER FOR CANNABIS COMMUNITY CARE AND RESEARCH