

Port St. Lucie medical-marijuana dispensary opening could be about month away

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Hazy about medical marijuana laws in Florida? TCPalm rolls out the basics for you. LISA BROADT/TCPALM Wochit

PORT ST. LUCIE — The Treasure Coast may be about a month away from getting its first medical-marijuana dispensary.

Alachua-based Liberty Health Services, which applied Feb. 14 to operate in a shopping center at 10941 U.S. 1, Port St. Lucie, could open as soon as four weeks, said company CEO George Scorsis.

Liberty's plans for a fast-track opening could propel it ahead of Tallahassee-based Trulieve, which had planned to be the Treasure Coast's first dispensary when it opened for business at 1814 Commerce Ave., Vero Beach.

Trulieve spokeswoman Victoria Walker said in a statement Friday the company plans to open its Vero Beach location in late April.

Liberty uses similar designs for its dispensaries, allowing the company to open them quickly, Scorsis said.

"We have a template we like to use that really talks to the patient. It should have the same feel (as other Liberty dispensaries); it should have the same services; it should have the same products," Scorsis said.

Port St. Lucie demographics made it an attractive location to open a dispensary, Scorsis said. Liberty considers population and the number of physicians in the vicinity, paying close attention to the number of physicians in the target area approved to recommend medical marijuana, he said.

There are 75 doctors across Brevard, Martin, St. Lucie and Indian River counties authorized to recommend medical marijuana to their patients to treat glaucoma, pain, anxiety and other issues. The closest dispensaries are in Lake Worth and Orlando, both about an hour away.

Doctors say many patients find it inconvenient to drive so far to obtain their products. While some dispensing companies offer delivery, doctors say the phone consultations can be ineffective.

Each Liberty dispensary is designed to accommodate individual consultations between the patients and staff, who are all trained on products, dosage and what works best for which illness, Scorsis said.

Liberty already operates one dispensary in The Villages, and plans to open another four within the next month in Fort Myers, Fort Lauderdale, St. Petersburg and Tampa.

In 2016, Florida voters approved a constitutional amendment legalizing the use of medical marijuana for patients with illnesses such as cancer, Crohn's disease, epilepsy or glaucoma.

State law requires communities and counties to allow dispensaries where they would allow pharmacies or to ban them altogether.

Dispensary companies are limited to 25 locations across the state, based on region and population.

Brevard, Indian River and St. Lucie counties are in the central region, which includes Orlando. Martin County is in the Southeast region, which includes Miami and Lake Worth.

Many of the misconceptions about medical marijuana dispensaries come from the recreational culture that surrounds cannabis, Scorsis said.

"It's going to take some time to recreate in people's minds what cannabis is, in terms of medicine," he said.

Scorsis said he wants to help educate the community about his business of providing a medicine to those who need it.

"It's our duty that we continue the knowledge we have," he said. "This is medicine. This is not a recreational product."