

Lots of jobs going to pot — industry on hiring spree

Bud tenders, delivery drivers most in demand — tech workers, too

By TOM CARTER



DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION LISE STAMPELI

SAY YOU WANT to vacation in comfy California lodgings that are marijuana-friendly and might even provide the stuff — if your medical card is in order. Bud and Breakfast, operating worldwide like Airbnb, can hook you up. Just browse its listings and choose.

“Sure, someone in the Tenderloin could rent out a room through us,” said George Ludwig, chief tech officer, manning an exhibit at the GreenRush Cannabis Job Fair April 30 in the nearby Regency Hotel’s fancy ballroom on Van Ness Avenue. “Maybe charge \$100 a night, or more.” Ludwig was looking to hire a Web designer.

His service is one of many new approaches to medical cannabis, reflecting dizzying growth, especially in dispensary-to-doorstep delivery services and technical innovations that are creating thousands of jobs.

The Extra was there to report on the job options for Tenderloin residents.

Ludwig was one of 32 exhibitors each paying \$420 to meet a stream of job-seekers and collect resumes for interviews later. Only a few exhibitors were based in San Francisco, one the 9-year-old Green Cross delivery service. None was from the Tenderloin (see sidebar).

The line waiting to get in for \$4.20 wrapped around the corner. Those who paid \$29 could skip the line. The final head count for the eight-hour event was 2,767.

The mood was upbeat as the throngs threaded along three rows of tables, hoping for new careers in a \$2.7 billion industry in California last year. ArcView Market Research, a cannabis investor group,

predicts it will be \$6.6 billion in 2020. By that time, one industry executive estimates, up to 500,000 new jobs will have been created.

Employee pay in most of the state is moderate, according to salary data from Indeed website. The highest paid, cannabis doctors, average \$116,000 a year, about the same as a tech worker. Dispensary managers make \$55,000, delivery drivers, \$39,000, and bud tenders, those front line retail sales clerks at the counters who know potencies and other details of their dispensary’s inventory, \$24,000. But these are averages. Bud tenders in the Bay Area can make up to \$52,000.

Marketing specialists, accountants, head bakers, executives and lab technicians range from \$60,000 to \$80,000 and higher.

A freelancer who designs music posters, Debray Carpenter of Bayview-Hunters Point, was picking up business cards, looking for a steady paycheck. Stephanie Miller, a Starbucks employee in Sonoma, sought a new career in customer service, having learned of the fair at the 420 celebration at Golden Gate Park.

But some just wanted to get a sense of the expanding industry and its burgeoning services, especially for shut-in patients and hobbled old-timers. Now patients can find relief from among an estimated 25,000 products, including scores of bud strains and a range of edibles from cannabis-infused chocolates to sublingual spray, sometimes helpful for epileptic children.

The turnout was short of GreenRush strategist Eddie Miller’s hopes of up to 4,000 but, still, he says, it’s “the biggest cannabis job fair ever.” Miller said the majori-



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Jane McKay of Berkeley Patients Group talks with **Christopher Hind**, an applicant looking for a cannabis-related job at the April 30 GreenRush Cannabis Job Fair.

ty of exhibitors were “technology-related, reflecting the Bay Area environment.” But GreenRush, an online marijuana delivery service for 255 dispensaries statewide, was looking for drivers.

California’s medical marijuana industry is getting a boost from new laws that regulate medical cannabis cultivation, manufacturing, transportation, testing, distribution and sales. The state will issue 17 different licenses.

“In one year the industry has gone insane,” said Brian Reyes, taking a minute away from the crowd bunched at his table. He co-owns Alta Supply with Jessica Lilga. Their 18-month-old delivery business with a staff of seven was looking to add three 40-hour-a-week drivers and two sales reps.

There was a strong sense among the job seekers that California will vote to approve recreational pot in November, and they want to be in the forefront and find job security in an industry set to explode.

Christopher Hind of Martinez, dressed in suit and tie, for the last six months has been a part-time bud tender and driver in Marin County. He was in line with a dozen others to speak with two representatives from the Berkeley Patients Group, one of the oldest dispensaries in Northern California. The 2,500-square-foot cooperative on San Pablo Avenue with 50 employees recently added delivery.

“I’ve always admired your operation,” he said to Jane McKay, the dispensary’s office manager. She had seven positions to fill, bud tenders and dispatchers. “These are 40-hour-a-week jobs with all the benefits, including overtime, paid vacations

and sick days,” she said.

“Yes,” Hind agreed, handing her his resume, “the benefits are quite good.”

Among the tech innovators, Cannabis IQ has developed point-of-sale software to track and graph sales, show product trends and who sold what, and keep patient records, among other features. Debbie Cote, who manned the exhibit of the new cloud-based company in San Mateo, was looking for an account manager, marketing ambassador, programmer and sales rep.

In the next aisle, Brian Wansolich, a cofounder of Seattle startup Headset, had a laptop showing color graphs of a hypothetical dispensary’s sales. Farmers and dispensaries need technology to streamline operations, he says. “If you want to know what products work best, here it is. It’s the way grocery stores operate and order.”

Typical of fairs, there were deals. GreenRush, for example, was offering 20% off four deliveries and, just for attending the fair, an \$80 credit. Bud and Breakfast was giving a year’s free listing, afterward a 3% charge for rentals. Upstairs in a balcony alcove you could fill out a form, see a doctor and get a cannabis card if qualified for \$19, instead of the usual \$39.

“But we’ve only had about a half-dozen” after three hours, said Dr. Perry Solomon, one of two RushMD doctors on hand, “and most were (annual) renewals.”

GreenRush is planning a job fair sequel in 2017 and looking for a bigger venue, Miller said. ■

Why Tenderloin has no pot clubs — and when it might get one

The Tenderloin has no medical marijuana dispensary. The neighborhood had two, but lost them in unsettling ways when Cafe.com at 120-24 Mason St. closed in 2007 and Sanctuary at 669 O’Farrell St. got shuttered in 2012.

Cafe.com’s landlord, CitiApartments, told the Planning Commission in a May 2007 letter that the pot club was unauthorized and, moreover, claimed it hadn’t known the pot club was even there, though previously CitiApartments had signed off on it with the city. The small, discreet club in back of the Internet cafe had 800 clients, 80% of them from the TL, owner Tariq Alazarie said. The nearby Hilton Hotel, wary of such things, had “leaned on” the landlord to shut it down, Alazarie said, though a hotel official denied that.

Northern California U.S. Attorney Melinda Haag put Sanctuary and its eight employees out of business with a letter to the landlord saying his building could be seized because he was harboring a federally illegal operation.

Sanctuary, which had a lease until 2020, had taken compassion to a high level. It had fewer than 1,000 patients and gave away medical pot to the poorest of them, subsidized rents of 10 of the neighborhood’s neediest up to \$600 a month, and each week made and distributed free sandwiches.

Such caring was lost on Haag. She forced Sanctuary to close in January 2012 and the storefront became a pet store.

There’s a good chance the Tenderloin will get a new pot club. Currently, 23 applications for new dispensaries are pending, one at 1276 Market St. at Ninth by FMSF Inc. Another application is Delta Health Center’s bid for 110 Sixth St. SoMa now has nine dispensaries.

Approval takes five months to a year, but there’s no limit to the number of dispensaries the city can have, according to the Health Department. In January, San Francisco had 28. ■

— Tom Carter



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