

# Cannabis Licensing Moves Forward in Rhode Island as Chief Exits

## Rhode Island Cannabis Chief Resigns as State Prepares for Retail Expansion

*Leadership Change Follows Major Milestone in State's Cannabis Licensing Program*

Rhode Island's top cannabis regulator, Kimberly Ahern, has resigned just one day after announcing the long-awaited timeline for awarding 24 new adult-use cannabis retail licenses. Her departure marks a significant transition for the state's young and evolving cannabis industry, which continues to balance growth with regulation.

Ahern, who has chaired the three-member Cannabis Control Commission since its inception in 2023, submitted her resignation on October 21, fueling speculation about her potential run for state attorney general in 2026. Her exit comes at a pivotal time when Rhode Island's cannabis market, valued at roughly \$124 million, is poised for its first expansion since legalization.

### From Chief of Staff to Cannabis Chief: Ahern's Tenure and Achievements

Appointed by Governor Dan McKee in June 2023, Ahern transitioned from her role as the governor's chief of staff to become the inaugural chair of the Cannabis Control Commission. Her appointment came with an annual salary of \$204,069, reflecting the importance and scrutiny of the role in shaping Rhode Island's cannabis policy.

During her tenure, Ahern focused on laying the foundation for equity, transparency, and sustainability in the state's cannabis market. In her resignation letter, she cited two major achievements: the creation of a social equity program and the launch of a new retail licensing window—two initiatives that have been long-awaited by entrepreneurs and advocates alike.

"These milestones have laid a strong foundation for the careful expansion of adult-use cannabis retail licensing statewide," Ahern wrote, underscoring her confidence in the regulatory path ahead.

### Rhode Island's Cannabis Market Faces Flat Sales but New Opportunities

Legal adult-use sales in Rhode Island began in December 2022, when the state allowed its seven existing medical marijuana dispensaries to sell cannabis to adults aged 21 and over. However, despite initial

excitement, sales have remained largely flat in 2025.

Industry experts and observers attribute this stagnation to the limited number of retail outlets, noting that expansion could reinvigorate the market and create new jobs. The state's decision to open applications for 24 new retail licenses is seen as a critical step toward diversifying access and fostering competition.

Applications are being accepted through December 29, 2025, and according to Ahern's final remarks during Monday's commission meeting, the state expects to award permits via a lottery in May 2026.

## **Prioritizing Equity: Social Equity and Worker-Owned Licenses**

Out of the 24 new licenses, six will be reserved for social equity applicants, while another six will be designated for worker-owned cooperatives. This allocation reflects Rhode Island's commitment to ensuring that communities disproportionately affected by past cannabis criminalization have a fair opportunity to participate in the legal market.

The social equity application process, which began in August, offers incentives such as reduced fees and technical assistance. Advocates have praised these steps but continue to call for more robust outreach and capital support for small business owners entering the industry.

This expansion marks the first time new retailers will be allowed to join the legal market since cannabis was legalized, signaling a new era for Rhode Island's cannabis economy.

## **Transition of Leadership: Michelle Reddish Steps Up**

In the wake of Ahern's resignation, Cannabis Office Administrator Michelle Reddish will oversee daily operations at the Cannabis Control Commission. Ahern commended Reddish's leadership and dedication, expressing confidence in her ability to maintain continuity during the transition.

"Administrator Michelle Reddish has led with integrity, compassion, and an unwavering commitment to success," Ahern noted in her letter to the governor, as reported by *The Providence Journal*.

While no interim chair has been formally named, Reddish's experience in administration and policy implementation positions her as a steady hand as Rhode Island prepares for the next phase of its cannabis rollout.

## **A Pivotal Moment for Rhode Island's Cannabis Future**

Ahern's departure adds a layer of uncertainty to Rhode Island's cannabis regulatory landscape. However, the groundwork she helped establish may ensure that progress continues uninterrupted. The upcoming retail expansion promises to reshape the market, create new business opportunities, and test the state's commitment to fair and inclusive growth.

As Rhode Island moves closer to the May 2026 retail licensing lottery, all eyes will be on how regulators manage the balance between market expansion, consumer safety, and social justice. With a new phase of retail competition on the horizon, the Ocean State's cannabis journey enters its most crucial chapter yet.

Email: [info@cannabisriskmanager.com](mailto:info@cannabisriskmanager.com) | Phone: +415-226-4060

© Copyright 2025 Cannabis Risk Manager. All Rights Reserved