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Business Monday

D | *The Republican*. | MONDAY, JULY 1, 2019



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Holyoke Community College celebrated the first graduates of Freight Farms Hydroponic Growing apprenticeship program at the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute Thursday. Above, at left, graduates take a group photo with president Christina Royal and other faculty members in front of the Freight Farms container. At right, assistant manager Claire McGale and HCC president Christina Royal are shown with lettuce plants inside the container. (HOANG "LEON" NGUYEN / THE REPUBLICAN)

Learning *with* lettuce

HCC's Freight Farms Hydroponic Growing grads seek jobs in cannabis, produce industries

BY JIM KINNEY
jkinney@repub.com

Ernesto Hernandez Martin graduated Thursday from the Freight Farms Hydroponic Growing apprenticeship program at Holyoke Community College, having learned how to grow lettuce in the controlled environment of two shipping containers.

But that's not all he can grow.

"I'm looking forward to getting a job in the new industries, either in marijuana or in growing vegetables," Hernandez Martin said while leading a tour of Freight Farms on Race Street in the city's industrial Flats neighborhood and adjacent to the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute.

Neither college officials nor Holyoke Mayor Alex Morse were shy Thursday about linking the hydroponic program with the city's new marijuana industry and its need for skilled labor. They

also said the program has the potential to help feed Holyokers who have trouble affording healthy meals.

"The skills they learn in the (shipping containers) are transferable to the cannabis industry," Morse said.

The college has no plans to grow anything but vegetables. The city, though, has embraced the newly legal cannabis industry.

Just this month, seed-to-sale marijuana company Trulieve Cannabis Corp., formerly Life Essence, bought a 150-year-old mill

building at 56 Canal St. for \$3.2 million, with plans to build a 126,000-square-foot growing, processing, testing and retail operation there.

Other operators have gotten city approvals as well.

HCC president Christina Royal said it's the college's job to prepare students for careers. And she knows the marijuana growers are hiring, as are vegetable growers looking to use hydroponics, or water-based growing systems, to save space and energy.

Damaris Aponte of Holy-



Assistant Manager Claire McGale explains how the shipping container works. (HOANG "LEON" NGUYEN / THE REPUBLICAN)

ONLINE

See more photos and a video of the Freight Farms Hydroponic Growing program at HCC online at [MassLive.com](https://www.masslive.com)

oke, another of the 11 who graduated Thursday, said she already has a job with EMB Natural Ventures LLC. The company has plans to build a marijuana cultivation facility at 140 Middle Water St. in Holyoke along with a

100,000-square-foot indoor produce growing operation at 1 Cabot St. EMB has similar operations in Connecticut.

"I'm doing community outreach," Aponte said. "I'm recruiting workers."

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Lettuce

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A former office administrator, her plant-growing experience up until now was limited to a backyard vegetable garden. Now she knows how to monitor nutrients and acidity, light and tempera-

Freight Farms — unofficial slogan: “At the Freight, lettuce be great” — is an urban agriculture collaboration between HCC and the city of Holyoke. The two refurbished shipping containers arrived more than a year ago in April 2018.

It’s funded with \$208,000 from the state through

“The plants need it just right. You have to babysit them.”

DAMARIS APONTE, GRADUATE

and development agency.

The 11 graduates, all Holyoke residents, completed a 90-hour hydroponic program over 12 weeks. Some, called apprentices, have signed up just for this program and sought a certificate. Others, called interns, are taking the course as part of an associate degree program at the college.

Inside the containers it’s a cool 60 degrees on this 90-degree day.

Lettuce plants start as seedlings in tiny plugs of shredded coconut shells, said assistant manager Claire McGale. They grow to maturity in hanging strips, called grow towers, of 10 to 12 plants each.

Each of the shipping containers can hold as many as 256 plants, enough to match an acre of outdoor growing



Alina Matsuk speaks to the group during the graduation ceremony on Thursday. (HOANG “LEON” NGUYEN / THE REPUBLICAN)



Holyoke Community College celebrated the first graduates of its Freight Farms Hydroponic Growing apprenticeship program at the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute Thursday. Alina Matsuk, left, explains how the shipping container works to the crowd. (HOANG “LEON” NGUYEN / THE REPUBLICAN)

ture.

“The plants need it just right,” she said. “You have to babysit them.”

MassDevelopment as part of its Transformative Development Initiative. MassDevelopment is the state’s finance

space. The vegetables are clean and pest-free, having lived inside a container free of insects and other contaminants.

And the vegetables are available year-round.

McGale brought out a grow tower of ribbed romaine lettuce Thursday, the same variety the farm grows for the salads served in the HCC cafeteria.

She pointed out the tanks and lines delivering different nutrients and circulating water. One tank has a solution that lowers the water’s pH as the fertilizers make the envi-

ronment too alkaline.

McGale explained that the method isn’t just good for lettuce and marijuana. She hopes to branch out to other leafy greens and to radishes.

The program also teaches students how to spot mature plant growth and when plants aren’t growing properly. They also learn how to label plants and to keep careful records of growth progress.

And she’s already talking with growers, of vegetables and of cannabis, about skills those employers want to see the next crop of students learn.