

With Proper Regulations, Medical Marijuana Businesses Reduce Crime and Improve Public Safety

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In December, the city of Livonia prohibited uses for enterprises or purposes that are contrary to state, federal or local laws. As medical marijuana (MMJ) is still illegal in the eyes of federal government, this ordinance effectively bans medical marijuana businesses in Livonia, despite the passage of the Michigan Medical Marijuana Act in November of 2008.

Police Chief Robert Stevenson said he brought the issue to the mayor's attention after conversations with an official with the Drug Enforcement Agency. "We've been doing research on what has happened in California since the law was passed," Stevenson said. "There's been a lot of violence out there, B&Es, shootings and murders at some of the dispensaries."

The use of the term dispensary is becoming an issue of controversy. To clarify, Michigan law does not allow for California style, retail, store front "pot shops" that sell medical marijuana to licensed patients. Michigan law allows MMJ patients to either grow their own medical marijuana, or designate a caregiver to grow the medicine. It does not allow for retail store outlet dispensaries.

Rich Isaacson, public information officer with the DEA, says the DEA has also conducted research, and their findings include increased crime in neighborhoods where California dispensaries are located. "What we've observed," Isaacson says, "is that crime rates increased in neighborhoods where the dispensaries were."

This research is based on a white paper produced by the California Police Chiefs Association (CPCA) on the impact of dispensaries on surrounding communities.

"Because they are repositories of valuable marijuana crops and large amounts of cash," the CPCA web site reports, "several operators of dispensaries have been attacked and murdered by armed robbers both at their storefronts and homes, and such places have been regularly burglarized."

However, other research on crime rates in dispensaries in California directly conflict with the findings of the CPCA.

Regulated Businesses Reduce Crime

Kris Hermes, Media Specialist for Americans For Safe Access (ASA), says the CPCA is a staunch opponent, across the board, to medical marijuana laws. He says the white paper issued against medical marijuana dispensaries is both exaggerated and inflammatory.

ASA is the leading national organization representing the interests of medical cannabis patients and their doctors. ASA conducted and released a study titled, “Medical Cannabis Dispensing Collectives And Local Regulation.” The study focuses on communities that have dispensary ordinances to guide policy makers when tackling dispensary regulations in their communities, rather than outright bans on medical marijuana businesses.

“Local officials across California have had a much different experience with dispensaries once they’ve been regulated,” says Hermes, “and that experience is generally that they reduce crime as opposed to increasing crime, and they find they’re actually beneficial to neighbors and improve business in the community.”

Crime statistics and the accounts of local officials surveyed by ASA indicate crime is actually reduced by the presence of a dispensary. And complaints from citizens and surrounding businesses are either negligible or are significantly reduced with the implementation of local regulations. This trend has led multiple cities and counties to consider regulation as a solution, rather than outright banning of medical marijuana businesses.

In short, the report describes benefits of regulated dispensaries to communities including:

- Providing access for the most seriously ill and injured
- Offering a safer environment for patients than having to buy on the illicit market
- Improving the health of patients through social support
- Helping patients with other social services, such as food and housing,
- Having a greater than average customer satisfaction rating for health care

The report goes so far as to say that creating dispensary regulations combats crime because:

- Dispensary security reduces crime in the vicinity
- Street sales tend to decrease
- Patients and operators are vigilant any criminal activity is reported to police

The report concludes with a section outlining the important elements for local officials to consider as they move forward with regulations for dispensaries.

“They’re far from being the blight that the CPCA makes them out to be.”

L.A. Police Department Finds Banks Robbed More Frequently

In fact, Los Angeles police Chief Charlie Beck says a report generated by Becks department looking at citywide robberies in 2009 found that medical marijuana clinics are not typically the magnets for crime that critics often portray. He acknowledged that opponents of the dispensaries complain that they attract a host of criminal activity to the neighborhoods, including robberies. But simply wasn’t the case.

“Banks are more likely to get robbed than medical marijuana dispensaries,” Beck said at a meeting in January with editors and reporters of the Los Angeles Daily News.

In 2009, the LAPD received reports of 71 robberies at the more than 350 banks in the city, compared to 47 robberies at medical marijuana facilities which number at least 800, the chief said in a follow up interview, in which he provided statistics from the report.

“I have tried to verify that because that, of course, is the mantra,” said Beck. “It doesn’t really bear out.”

When asked if the DEA uses other resources for statistics other than the CPCA regarding the impact of medical marijuana businesses on nearby communities, Agent Isaacson replied, “I personally have not looked at any other resources.”

www.safeaccessnow.org/downloads/dispensaries.pdf
www.californiapolicechiefs.org

SIDEBAR

FROM THE “Medical Cannabis Dispensing Collectives And Local Regulation. ”

REPORT:

DISPENSARIES REDUCE CRIME AND IMPROVE PUBLIC SAFETY

Kern County passed a dispensary ordinance in July 2006. The sheriff

there noted in his staff report that "regulatory oversight at the local levels helps prevent crime directly and indirectly related to illegal operations occurring under the pretense and protection of state laws authorizing Medical Marijuana Dispensaries." Although dispensary-related crime has not been a problem for the county, the regulations will help law enforcement determine the legitimacy of dispensaries and their patients.

The sheriff specifically pointed out that, "existing dispensaries have not caused noticeable law enforcement problems or secondary effects for at least one year. As a result, the focus of the proposed Ordinance is narrowed to insure Dispensary compliance with the law" (Kern County Staff Report, Proposed Ordinance Regulating Medical Cannabis Dispensaries, July 11, 2006).

The presence of a dispensary in the neighborhood can actually improve public safety and

reduce crime. Most dispensaries take security for their members and staff more seriously than many businesses. Security cameras are often used both inside and outside the premises, and security guards are often employed to ensure safety. Both cameras and security guards serve as a general deterrent to criminal activity and other problems on the street. Those likely to engage in such activities tend to move to a less-monitored area, thereby ensuring a safe environment not only for dispensary members and staff but also for neighbors and businesses in the surrounding area. Residents in areas surrounding dispensaries have reported improvements to the neighborhood. Kirk C., a long time San Francisco resident, commented at a city hearing, "I have lived in the same apartment along the Divisadero corridor in San Francisco for the past five years. Each store that has opened in my neighborhood has been nicer, with many new restaurants quickly becoming some of the city's hottest spots. My neighborhood's crime and vandalism seems to be going down year after year. It strikes me that the dispensaries have been a vital part of the improvement that is going on in my neighborhood." Oakland's city administrator for the ordinance regulating dispensaries, Barbara Killey, notes that "The areas around the dispensaries may be some of the safest areas of Oakland now because of the level of security, surveillance, etc...since the ordinance passed." Likewise, Santa Rosa Mayor Jane Bender noted that since the city passed its ordinance, there appears to be "a decrease in criminal activity. There certainly has been a decrease in complaints. The city attorney says there have been no complaints either from citizens or from neighboring businesses." Neighboring Sebastopol has had a similar experience.