

DEA Delivers Menacing Letters To Seattle Businesses

Medical Marijuana Advocates Speak Out About Warning From the Feds

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Seattle – Nearly a dozen local business owners are in legal limbo after receiving letters from the Drug Enforcement Administration telling them to shut down or face federal prosecution. 11 legally licensed storefronts were targeted as part of a nationwide push that has zeroed in on Washington and California. The legal weapon of choice: civil forfeiture warnings.

“These letters suggest that if my clients remain in business, they could lose their companies, their homes, their cars, basically every piece of property that the Feds consider an asset,” says Seattle attorney Kurt Boehl who represents three of the affected access points, including Wallingford’s Truly Helpful Collective.

“We strictly followed Washington’s Medical Marijuana Law [RCW 69.51A],” says Arasp Khoshkhoo. “We had business licenses from the City of Seattle and the State of Washington. We paid our taxes. We did everything any other legitimate business would do.”

The federal forfeiture notices stand in stark contrast to “admonishment letters” recently handed out by the Seattle Police Department. After an undercover narcotics sting in the University District in March, six people arrested for drug trafficking were given warning letters and released without being charged. The written notices from SPD referenced Initiative 502, which allows citizens to possess up to an ounce of marijuana for personal use.

“The people of Washington have spoken,” says Kari Boiter of the Washington Chapter of Americans for Safe Access. “An overwhelming number of voters say cannabis is not a crime, particularly if you are seriously ill. Yet the Feds continue to threaten patients and caregivers with civil and criminal penalties. Is this how they will treat the I-502 industry?”

The Washington State Liquor Control Board is currently moving forward with a plan to tax and regulate marijuana for recreational purposes. In light of Initiative 502’s passage, the LCB plans to issue state licenses to marijuana producers, processors and distribution centers.

Wykowski and Associates represents a number of the medical marijuana access points that received warning letters from the DEA this week. Attorney Rachel Kurtz says, “these collectives have worked extensively with the City and State to ensure compliance. The letters from the DEA make no distinction between legitimate licensed businesses and those who have made no effort to obey state and local laws.”

This is not the first time the DEA has targeted medical cannabis with civil forfeiture. Last fall, more than 30 Seattle-area businesses were put on notice. The latest batch of letters is part of a coordinated crackdown in at least two states. In most instances, the notices cite proximity to neighboring schools and “protected areas”, but one store owner forced to close in the fall says she is a victim of the conflict between state and federal law.

“When I opened my shop in Shoreline, the city measured the distance between my front door and the school down the street,” says Laura Healy of now-closed Green Hope Patient Network. “The city said I was 1,058 feet from the nearest school, but the letter from the Feds said I was within a thousand-foot school zone.”

Healy is a steering committee member of the newly-formed Washington Chapter of Americans for Safe Access. Among other priorities, the group has launched to ensure that the needs of terminally ill and disabled patients remain at the forefront of people’s minds as Washington leads the national dialogue surrounding cannabis prohibition.

For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact Kari Boiter or Lydia Ensley from the Washington Chapter of Americans For Safe Access. Kari can be reached at 206-612-0916 and Lydia is available at 206-369-7392.