

U.S. drug agents raid 13 medical marijuana sites

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SAN DIEGO – Federal agents fanned out across San Diego County on Monday, executing simultaneous search warrants on 13 medical marijuana dispensaries that have been selling pot to sick and dying patients.

No one was arrested on suspicion of drug-dealing, officials said, but agents seized dozens of pounds of high-grade marijuana along with equipment, computers, patient files and other materials inside the storefront offices.

In most cases, the agents arrived unannounced with guns drawn. They handcuffed employees and ran background checks on both workers and patients. They used drug-sniffing dogs to seek out marijuana and carted away computers and other equipment in trucks and sport-utility vehicles.

A handful of people were arrested on outstanding warrants that were unrelated to the use or possession of medical marijuana, a spokesman for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration said.

Officials characterized the law-enforcement action as part of an ongoing criminal investigation. But they declined to say if or when any charges would be brought against the dispensary operators.

"We're still in the course of our investigation," DEA spokesman Misha Piastro said.

The raids were conducted on dispensaries doing business in San Diego and San Marcos after undercover agents purchased marijuana without the paperwork required under state law, Piastro said.

In 1996, California voters approved the use of marijuana for patients who have a doctor's recommendation, despite the fact that federal law prohibits marijuana use under any circumstance. As a result, federal agents still make arrests in California, while cities and counties either follow the state law or the federal mandate.

In San Diego County, the Board of Supervisors recently refused to follow a provision of the state law and issue identification cards that would help medical marijuana users avoid arrest. Last month, they went a step further and said they would file a lawsuit to challenge the state law.

The supervisors voted against the identification cards even after being criticized earlier this year by the San Diego County grand jury. The jury's report said the supervisors had ignored the will of California voters and should take "all possible action" to promote access to marijuana for seriously ill patients.



JIM BAIRD / Union-Tribune

Federal agents confer in an alley outside the Native Sun Dispensary, a medical-marijuana storefront that was one of 13 raided Monday.

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