

Feds escalate efforts to close pot dispensaries in California

By John Hoeffel, Los Angeles Times

Federal prosecutors are threatening to shut down medical marijuana dispensaries throughout California, sending letters that warn landlords to stop sales of the drug within 45 days or face the possibility that their property will be seized and they will be charged with a crime.

The stepped-up enforcement escalates the Obama administration's efforts to rein in the spread of pot stores, which accelerated after the attorney general announced in 2009 that federal prosecutors would not target people using medical marijuana in states that allow it.

"It's coming out of left field as far as we're concerned," said Joe Elford, the chief counsel for Americans for Safe Access, which advocates for medical marijuana use. "I really don't know what inspired this. It's a complete about-face from what [Obama] said when he was campaigning."

The initiative, spearheaded by the four U.S. attorneys in the state, will focus on dispensaries selected by the prosecutors, said a person familiar with the operation. He declined to say what criteria would be used to target dispensaries and asked not to be identified because the prosecutors are scheduled to make the official announcement at a news conference Friday morning in Sacramento.

Landlords for some dispensaries have already received letters, including the owner of the building that houses the Marin Alliance for Medical Marijuana in Fairfax, Calif., the oldest dispensary in the country. "I assume the story you're calling

about is: Obama takes resources away from fighting terrorists and goes after old ladies with glaucoma,” said Greg Anton, a lawyer who represents the dispensary.

The letter to the Marin Alliance notes that the dispensary is within a prohibited distance of a park, raising the possibility that enforcement will zero in on stores within 1,000 feet of schools and playgrounds, a distance that can bring enhanced penalties for illegal drug sales. But letters received by dispensaries in San Diego make no mention of such prohibitions. “We’re trying to figure this out,” said Jessica C. McElfresh, who represents some dispensaries in the city. “I am surprised at the size of this. I am surprised by the vast amount of planning that has clearly gone into it.”

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