

L.A. City Atty Vows to Aggressively Weed out Unlicensed Cannabis Shops

Now that recreational cannabis for adults 21 and over is legal in the Golden State, people outside of California —especially in states where possessing weed is still a crime— may imagine a veritable free-for-all when it comes to marijuana, a land where authorities see all marijuana use as equal and therefore make it a practice to look the other way. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Case in point: late last month, elected officials and local enforcement in Los Angeles (the state's largest cannabis market) held a press conference to announce that they would be getting serious about weeding out marijuana businesses operating without a license.

An unambiguous warning to underground shops...

"If you're operating an illegal cannabis shop," L.A. City Attorney Mike Feuer said, "you're going to be subject to criminal prosecution."

...and a large batch of cases filed against the unlicensed

That's not just an idle threat likely to go up in smoke: Feuer reported that his office has already filed three dozen criminal cases against 140 defendants (the cases involve 32 cannabis retail stores and one delivery service). Each of the aforementioned defendants have to worry about \$1,000 in penalties and a potential six months of incarceration (the maximum sentence).

Feuer said that his office decided which offenders to pursue first based on the suspicion of criminal activity other than unlicensed marijuana sales occurring. Around a third of the 32 unlicensed dispensaries are located in South L.A., part of which falls in City Councilman Marqueece Harris-Dawson's 8th District.

Councilman Harris-Dawson told the *Los Angeles Times* that his constituents have long complained about illegal pot shops. He hopes other municipal departments use Feuer as a role model and pull the plug on unlicensed cannabis dispensaries. However, Harris-Dawson noted that the issue is not limited to his district. "This is a problem all over the city of Los Angeles, from Venice to the West Valley, down to San Pedro," he said.

The press conference also announced the City Attorney's intent to send out cease and desist letters to cannabis operators that have undergone "preliminary assessments" and have been found to lack temporary approvals required by state and local regulators.

More than three tons of illegal weed seized by LAPD since January

Recreational cannabis has been legal for nearly six months in California, and in that time the L.A. Police Department has confiscated over 6,000 pounds of cannabis and more than two dozen firearms from canna-preneurs operating without the required licenses. Due to finite resources, LAPD Lieutenant Stacy Spell told *Marijuana News* that the department has focused on unlicensed shops that have a negative effect on their communities (for instance, due to criminal activity beyond licensing issues and chronic nuisances).

Last year voters in the city approved Measure M, which gives enforcement muscle to more than the typical channels like the City Attorney's office and the LAPD. For example, if the City Council gives the green light, the Department of Water and Power would be permitted to halt utility service to properties where unlicensed marijuana businesses are operating.

Another voter-approved measure addressing the regulation of legal cannabis is Proposition D. It granted "limited immunity" to some medical marijuana businesses and allowed them to continue operations until the city enforced a blanket ban. According

Feuer, the City Attorney's Office shuttered over 1,000 illegal cannabis retailers during that window of time, and he said that his office plans to be "equally aggressive" with the regulatory enforcement currently underway.

"Businesses that flout the City's new cannabis law will be held accountable," Feuer said in a statement. "I urge all property owners and marijuana businesses to follow the law and work with my office and the City's Department of Cannabis Regulation to avoid facing serious criminal consequences."

City Atty urges consumers to shop local, but shop legal

Clearly the authorities and municipal agencies aren't the only ones who can take a bite out of illegal weed sales. Feuer had a message for Los Angeles residents in the market for cannabis. He implored them to arm themselves with information and check out the Department of Cannabis Regulation's website to view the list of 147 legal retail establishments in the city, thereby weed out the illicit ones. "If a location is not on that list," he said, "I urge residents of our city not to shop there."

Beyond the fact that criminal activity is never a good thing for a community, local authorities are likely eager to stamp out illegal underground marijuana businesses for the drain on the city's revenue they represent. Legal cannabis promises to be big business for the state in the form of taxes and fees.

"We applaud the city for doing this," Adam Spiker, executive director of the marijuana industry group the Southern California Coalition, told the *Los Angeles Times*. "You can't have a regulated industry without strong enforcement. If you're not licensed, you should shut down or be shut down."

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