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## L.A.'s marijuana stores take root

By William M. Welch, USA TODAY

WEST HOLLYWOOD, Calif. — A decade ago, the Rev. Scott Imler co-wrote and organized the ballot initiative that made California the first state to legalize marijuana for medical use.

Now Imler shakes his head with dismay over what his law has wrought: scores of storefront marijuana shops across Southern California with menus of pot varieties for sale to anyone with a doctor's note.

"What we set out to do was put something in the statutes that said medicine was a defense in case they got arrested using marijuana for medical reasons," Imler says. "What we got was a whole different thing, a big new industry."

### 'Dispensaries' boom

Los Angeles has become a boomtown for pot stores. The number of "dispensaries" as they are known has gone from four in late 2005 to 98 one year later, according to the Los Angeles Police Department.

It all started in 1996 when California voters passed Proposition 215, which legalized the growing and possession of marijuana for medical use. Supporters such as the marijuana-legalization group NORML pushed for the law, saying smoking pot lessens pain and alleviates nausea of serious illnesses.

Cooperatives sprung up, permitted under the law to receive "reasonable compensation" for the distribution of their product. Then stores opened, which in Los Angeles can sell up to a half-pound of pot to an individual.

None of this is legal under federal law, and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) recently raided several stores in January in West Hollywood, hauling away thousands of pounds of pot and hundreds of plants.

"It's really become a way of skirting the law for the recreational use of marijuana," Los Angeles police Lt. Paul Vernon says.

Stores that sell marijuana are touted in Los Angeles' alternative newspapers and on the Internet. Ads also offer doctors who will write a legal "recommendation" that a patient needs pot for ailments as common as headaches and depression. In online reviews, users discuss the merits of varieties with names such as "Mountain High," "Purple Haze," and "Gold Kush," at prices of up to \$80 for one-eighth ounce.

The stores are accused of selling to people who don't have health issues or doctors' notes and of raking in huge profits. In essence, some drug dealers may have gone legit, police say.

Los Angeles Police Chief William Bratton says it's time to crack down. He has asked the City Council to impose a moratorium on new

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pot stores and to impose restrictions on hours, location and how they operate.

In a report to the Board of Police Commissioners late last year, Bratton said "the spirit and intent of this act has been exploited and abused for both profit and recreational drug abuse by many of the medical marijuana dispensaries." He said crime and complaints have surrounded some of the stores, including open smoking of marijuana on nearby streets and targeting school students with store advertising fliers.

In an effort to beat an anticipated crackdown, more stores have sprung up. Four dozen opened in the past few months, Vernon estimates. He says L.A. now has 140 pot stores, some close to schools.

#### 'More about intimidation'

In Los Angeles County there are around 200 stores, DEA special agent Sarah Pullen estimates, far more than in the San Francisco area to the north. She says all of them are breaking federal law.

After the DEA raid in January, some of the targeted stores have reopened. The raids have prompted protests.

"This is more about intimidation on the part of DEA than actually enforcing laws," says Steph Sherer, executive director of Americans for Safe Access.

"Even if there are abuses, what happens if you are told you have cancer and have to start chemotherapy next week? Do you know where to find marijuana?" she says.

Ten other states allow medical marijuana, but none is as permissive as California's law, Sherer says. The intent, Imler says, was to provide a risk-free, no-hassle way for people with real medical needs for marijuana to grow or obtain it without fear of arrest.

In West Hollywood, one of the most liberal communities in the state, cops take a hands-off policy "unless there are people around there complaining," says Deputy John Klaus of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's West Hollywood division.

Now pastor at Crescent Heights United Methodist Church in West Hollywood, Imler, 49, moved here from Northern California in 1995 to help organize the medical-marijuana-ballot movement. He says he used marijuana first to counter severe seizures from a head injury, and later when he developed cancer.

He organized a marijuana collective that was shut down by federal agents in 2001. He was arrested and received one year probation. Cancer-free, he says he stopped using marijuana. But he worries that the state will pull back from its commitment to medical marijuana if people abuse the law.

"I was pretty na?ve," he says. "I thought people would act in good faith."

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