Colorado Deputy: School Resource Officers Will Be Busier if Medical Marijuana Passes in Florida

By: Nancy Smith
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A discovery of Colorado students as young as 12 with "substantial amounts of marijuana" in their possession has anti-drug organizations sounding alarm bells and calling it "a canary in a coal mine" for Florida.

Cpl. Mike Dillon of the Mesa County (Colorado) sheriff's department confirmed statements he made to Drug Free America Foundation. In a telephone interview Wednesday he told Sunshine State News he caught children not yet in their teens bringing as much as three-quarters of an ounce of marijuana to school, "which is quite a bit of marijuana, especially for a 12-year-old." Dillon said he was working as a middle school resource officer when he discovered the uptick in student marijuana possession. "Kids were stealing medical marijuana from their parents. I was finding ... more often than not, they had taken it from somebody in their residence and those people didn't even know their kids were taking it."

Colorado voters approved the regulation of medical marijuana in 2000 and limited recreational marijuana -- up to 1 ounce in adults age 21 and over -- effective last Jan. 1.

Asked how certain he was that the "uptick" came from medical and not the newer recreational marijuana, Dillon said in all cases in which he was involved, "parents had a medical prescription for the drug."

Hard numbers as proof aren't easy to come by because generally speaking, school disciplinary statistics don't isolate marijuana from general drug violations. But school resource officers, counselors, nurses, staff and officials with Colorado school safety and disciplinary programs are anecdotally reporting an increase in marijuana-related incidents in middle and high schools.

The best quantifiable evidence in Colorado to date that indicates marijuana is a significantly growing problem in schools comes from a 2012-13 report that documents why 720 students were expelled from public schools across the state. For the first time, marijuana was separated from other drugs when school officials were asked to identify the reason for students' expulsions. Marijuana came in first. It was listed as being a reason for 32 percent of expulsions.

In an interview with the Denver Post, Janelle Krueger, longtime adviser to the Colorado Association of School Resource Officers, said, "We have seen a sharp rise in drug-related disciplinary actions which,

anecdotally, from credible sources, is being attributed to the changing social norms surrounding marijuana." Krueger is the program manager for Expelled and At-Risk Student Services for the Colorado Department of Education.

She said school officials believe the jump -- or uptick -- is linked to marijuana's availability and the message legalization sends to kids -- even though 21 is the legal age in the Rocky Mountain State -- that marijuana is a medicine and a safe and accepted recreational activity.

Christine Harms, director of the Colorado School Safety Resource Center, backs up Krueger's observations. She said school psychologists “are seeing more incidents of kids smoking and thinking it is the safe thing to do.” One doctor who works with adolescents with drug problems reported to Harms that 74 percent of the youth in his marijuana addictions group said they got their marijuana from someone who has a medical marijuana card.

According to the Post, school and law enforcement officials claim "marijuana that parents or other adults might have kept hidden in the past may now be left in the open, where it is easier for kids to dip into it to sell, use or, in some cases, simply to show off."

Grand Junction, Colo., school resource officer Jeff Grady, who has spent 25 years working in schools, told the Post a story about sitting in his car at a park near Grand Junction High School one day watching groups of kids through binoculars because they come to the park to smoke on lunch breaks.

"Kids are smoking before school and during lunch breaks. They come into school reeking of pot," he told the newspaper. "They are being much more brazen." He said they're harder to cite for any offense because now they can say they were around an adult medical marijuana user and weren't smoking themselves.

Calvina Fay, director of the Drug Free America Foundation, sees Colorado's dramatic increase in pre-teen schoolchildren possessing marijuana as a warning to Floridians who will vote on approving medical marijuana in November.

“This is the sad reality that we are seeing in all states that have passed these measures,” said Fay in a written statement. “They use people who suffer with debilitating cancer or other conditions as a Trojan horse to pass these broad measures, and inevitably these powerful pot products end up in kids’ hands.”

It troubles Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd, president of the Florida Sheriff's Association, and other public safety officials that the ballot language Floridians will vote on does not address age in any way. “Amendment 2 is full of loopholes, including no age restrictions, which may allow youth to easily obtain marijuana without parental consent,” Judd has said.

Fay also points to weak state oversight of pot shops, which she believes invites problems. A Florida Department of Health fiscal analysis predicts there will be more than 1,800 pot shops allowed to sell

marijuana, but anticipates the hiring of only 13 inspectors to provide oversight statewide. “We are unleashing the Wild West of incredibly potent marijuana and not providing the sheriffs to oversee it,” said Fay. “This is a canary in a coal mine for Florida’s parents and school officials; they need to heed these warnings from Colorado.”

National policy organization Drug Free America Foundation said in its press release it is working with the Don’t Let Florida Go to Pot coalition to educate Floridians on the dangers of marijuana so they can cast an informed vote on Amendment 2 in November.