

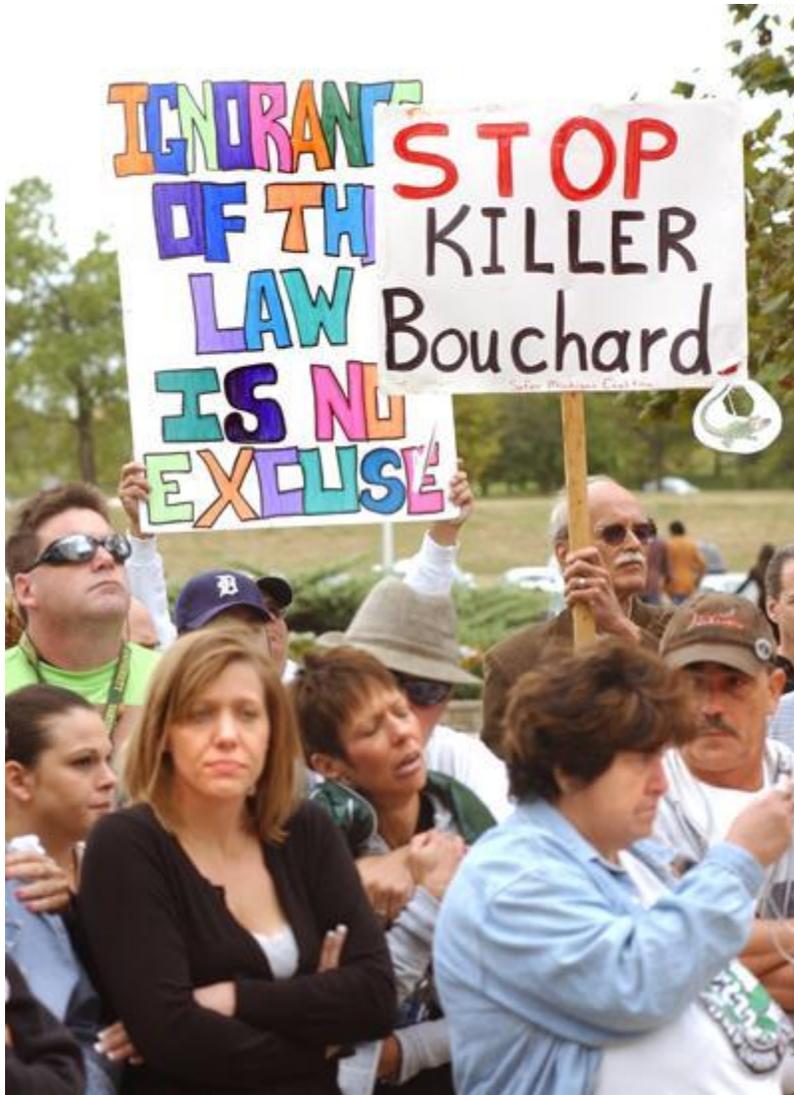
UPDATED: Protesters demand Oakland sheriff 'stop arresting patients' who use marijuana

Published: Thursday, September 09, 2010

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Medical marijuana patient Leah Reeves of Clarkston stood along the sidelines at a protest at the Oakland County Courthouse Wednesday.

Behind her, speakers were condemning officials for conducting an Aug. 25 drug raid that resulted in nearly 20 people being arrested on various charges involving possession of medical marijuana.

“If I can’t use (medical marijuana), then I have to take another medicine that has side effects,” she said.

“I don’t want this,” she said, referring to the raids, “to be something I have to be afraid of.”

The rally, which drew about 100 people to the courthouse’s south side just before noon, was sponsored by the

Michigan Medical Marijuana Association, patients and caregivers. People wore buttons, plastic marijuana leaves and T-shirts to indicate their beliefs.

Neil Yashinsky of Troy held signs that said, “Stop Arresting Patients” and “Bouchard Hates Patients,” a reference to Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard.

“I think it’s awful the way the sheriff is ignoring the will of the people of Michigan,” Yashinsky said.

“There should be more important priorities for the sheriff than arresting patients and their caregivers.”

Responding to criticism leveled against him at Wednesday’s rally, Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard said: “The prosecutor, county executive and myself all believe in the rights of patients and helping suffering people — but that’s not what this is all about.”

Bouchard said the group is blaming the wrong people. “The Michigan Marijuana Caregivers on their own Web page say there’s nowhere to buy it, so why blame law enforcement?

“The executive director of compassion clubs lists as his main goal to end the prohibition of marijuana. He lists ‘Free the Weed’ as his goal and his political party as the Marijuana Party, his religion as Cannabis Christian.

“These people (arrested in the raids) were breaking the law. Under the state of Michigan statute, dispensaries are illegal. ... You can’t blame the ref when they enforce the rules as they exist. If you want to change the rules, the place to do that is in Lansing. It’s ridiculous that people are getting medical marijuana cards for sore shoulders, stomach aches ... a 5-year-old boy was issued a card.”

Tim Cope, a medical marijuana patient from Fort Gratiot, drew stares wearing a giant marijuana leaf costume.

“They need to start leaving the patients alone and let them do their thing,” he said.

Several people addressed the crowd, including Joe Cain, chief executive officer for the Lansing-based Michigan Medical Marijuana Association.

“Do not kick in our doors, and leave our children alone,” said Cain.

People in the crowd shouted approvals.

“We’re tired of it,” said one.

At times, the crowd whistled and chanted in unison, “Stop arresting patients.”

Some supporters turned their homemade signs toward the courthouse, where county employees were watching from inside the building.

Walking through the crowd, Donnis Reese, executive director for the Alliance of Coalitions for Healthy Communities, said she was at the rally to urge that medical marijuana be dispensed as the voters had originally intended.

“We would really like ways of talking and working together so our communities can stay safe and healthy,” she said.

Supporters hovered near Barb Agro, the widow of Sal Agro. Sal Agro of Lake Orion complained to The Oakland Press that his family had been targeted in the Aug. 25 raid, and he walked around his home showing places where police had torn up bedding and removed marijuana plants. His wife and sons worked at the Clinical Relief medical marijuana facility in Ferndale, which also was part of the raid.

Sal Agro had hip surgery Aug. 31 and died Sept. 2 of a heart failure.

His son, Nicholas, held a framed photograph of his father.

“It’s been heart-breaking for my family,” said Nicholas of Lake Orion. “My father wasn’t intending to be the poster child for medical marijuana.”

Michael Komorn, a criminal defense attorney and board member of the Michigan Medical Marijuana Association, said to the crowd that “we are here to show that Sal’s death was not in vain.”

“The unnecessary raids and arrests of patients and caregivers needs to stop, and the only way we can do that is through education, dialogue and understanding,” he said. “This is what the community wants — to work with law enforcement, to see patients treated properly and the recognition of medical marijuana as a legitimate means to help those who may be suffering.”

Regarding Agro's death, Bouchard said: “It’s sad that the gentleman passed, but he died of heart failure, it had nothing to do with medical marijuana.”