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Reporter biographies - Yesenia Amaro
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Merced County sees steady pace in issuing medical pot cards

Patients must have persistent condition to be eligible.

By YESENIA AMARO
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The number of medical marijuana cards issued in Merced County has remained relatively steady since the program's implementation in 2007.

A total of 76 cards have been issued since the program began. The cards are only valid for one year, and a renewal application is required every year.

Nine cards have been issued in the current 2010-11 fiscal year, which began July 1. Twenty-nine cards were issued during the 2009-10 fiscal year.

 **Related story: Los Banos medical marijuana dispensary closes**

Richard Rios, community health services manager for the Merced County Department of Public Health, said the average number of cards issued in the past three full years -- not counting the current fiscal year and the first year of the program -- was 21.

Rios said there was a slight increase during the 2009-10 fiscal year, compared with the previous fiscal year when 17 cards were issued.

The number of cards issued statewide surged during the 2009-10 fiscal year, rising to 12,659 from 9,221 cards issued during the 2008-09 fiscal year.

Rios said in Merced County the fee to obtain a medical marijuana card is \$250 and \$112.50 for Medi-Cal patients and caregivers. Caregivers are able to apply for a card if the patient has a chronic disease and the patient is not mobile.

The local public health department's role is to help patients with the application process. They also verify that the patient is a Merced County resident, and that the physician listed in the application is licensed in the state. "We don't do any medical assessments," Rios said. "We just do what's required for the card."

Local public health officials also verify if the applicant is a patient of the physician listed on the application. The patient must have a chronic or persistent medical condition, such as anorexia, arthritis, cancer or migraines, among others.

Ralph Montano, spokesman with the California Department of Public Health, said the state issues the cards after the the background checks and the paperwork is completed at the county level. A total of 48,594 cards have been issued statewide since 2004.

Still, Montano said that doesn't mean that there are 48,594 patients with cards, since the cards are only valid for a year. A total of 4,582 cards have been issued statewide during the current year.

Kamy Akhavan, president of ProCon.org, a nonpartisan organization, said 15 states and the District of Columbia have legal medical marijuana programs. Arizona became the 15th state in November with the passage of a measure to legalize medical marijuana.

The state of South Dakota also had a measure on November's ballot, but it was defeated by 63 percent of those voting.

Akhavan said the 15 states have separate approaches to make sure that only approved patients are getting the drug. The nonprofit had been conducting research on the topic since 2004.

The only medical marijuana dispensary in Merced County shut down Dec. 31. According to a volunteer with Purple Cross Rx, a Hollister-based nonprofit medical marijuana dispensary, the nonprofit, located at 225 N. Mercy Springs Road, Los Banos, was evicted by the city. The

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dispensary had been operating in the city since the summer.

Medical marijuana dispensaries are banned in Los Banos.

Reporter Yesenia Amaro

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