

Statewide ID cards advance

Contributed by F. Aron Smith

Patients and advocates have been busy lobbying their county leaders to implement the statewide medical marijuana ID card program, as required by Senate Bill 420. This past summer has been peppered with both victories and challenges for the medical cannabis community. Currently 23 counties are issuing the state ID cards and the remaining 35 lie somewhere between preparing to issue the cards and flat-out defiance of established state law.

Highlights from around the Golden State

San Luis Obispo — After months of tirelessly lobbying the County's elected officials and administrators, San Luis Obispo County patients gained their Board of Supervisors approval to implement the ID card program through the Department of Public Health.

The 3-to-2 vote took place August 1 after a lengthy hearing attended by a little over a dozen local patients and supporters. According to county staff, the cards will be available to patients for a \$78 fee (\$39 for MediCal recipients) sometime in mid-December. Fortunately, the SLO Dept of Health has also agreed to adopt Safe Access Now's model protocol for the program which includes provisions that provide maximum privacy to participants.

Oakland — The Alameda County Department of Public Health has entered into a public/private partnership with the Oakland Cannabis Buyers Club (dba Alameda County Patient Services), which is now responsible for accepting and processing applications for the cards. The program was opened to all qualified patients in Alameda County Aug. 1.

Los Angeles — Although the LA County Board of Supervisors approved plans to move forward with the program back in May, the ID cards are not yet available to patients. Bureaucratic obstacles and staffing problems have slowed progress on the program, but the cards should finally be available sometime this fall.

Fairfield — The Solano County Board of Supervisors Sept. 26 voted against directing their Department of Health to implement the program. The Vacaville Reporter recently editorialized in favor of the Department implementing the program anyway, as it is their ultimate responsibility to comply with the state's medical marijuana statutes. Unfortunately, this is an unlikely outcome, considering the fact that it took tremendous effort on the part of local organizers just to get the Director of Health to begin publicly discussing the program. Patients in Solano County are still weighing their options for the immediate future, however the program will likely be placed on a back-burner until the San Diego v. State of California lawsuit is resolved.

Riverside — Inland Empire patients who have been working with Riverside County officials to develop guidelines for medical cannabis dispensaries were delivered a heartless blow from the County Board of Supervisors last month. The board surprisingly voted 4-to-1 to impose an outright ban on dispensaries in all unincorporated areas within the county and to join San Diego, San Bernardino and Merced counties in their lawsuit against the state. This decision was no doubt a result of Riverside County DA Grover Trask's "white paper" letter, released one week before the hearing, which opined that all medical marijuana dispensaries are in violation of both state and federal law. The letter did not address the ID card program and Deputy County Counsel, Katherine Lind, said the board's decision should not interfere with the card program.

El Centro — Patients in Imperial County were able to avoid political wrangling over the implementation of the card program because the county's bylaws allowed health officials to move forward without a Board of Supervisors vote. The Imperial County Department of Health began accepting applications for the ID cards on September 1.

Modesto — On the heels of the DEA/Modesto police raid on the California Healthcare Collective in Modesto, the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors will be conducting a hearing on the implementation of the ID card program. County Supervisors are slated to discuss the program in late October, including whether or not to wait for the outcome of the San Diego lawsuit.

According to local medical cannabis patients and advocates, the recent raids only highlight the urgent need for a voluntary registry program in Stanislaus County.

Fresno — Fresno County has decided to outsource the administration of the ID card program to a private contractor.

The county will be accepting bids for administration of the program through the end of November. The stated goal of the County Department of Health is to have ID cards available by the end of the year.

Clearly we are making progress toward SB420 implementation; however the legal battle underway between San Diego County and the state makes the political climate more challenging in those counties that have yet to move into compliance with California law.

Safe Access Now expects the San Diego Superior Court to make a ruling in favor of California's medical marijuana laws by the end of the year. Along with the continued dedication of local patients, a favorable ruling in this case will go a long way towards ensuring that every medical cannabis patient in California is granted the protections afforded to them by state law and the will of the voters.

* Smith heads up the Safe Access Now cannabis ID card project. For more information about the state ID card program in your county, contact Aaron Smith at 707-291-0076.