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Pot bust targets upscale homes in El Dorado Hills, Placerville

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Property class: Residential. 3,660 sq. ft. w/4 bedrooms, 3-baths on three levels. Backs up to school in beautiful El Dorado Hills. Finished basement affords huge cash crop potential. Must see.

That could have been the ad for the \$874,000 home in an affluent part of El Dorado Hills that authorities visited early Tuesday. But they weren't there for an open house.

In a series of raids, federal agents and police targeted three indoor marijuana growing operations in El Dorado Hills and Placerville on Tuesday, serving eight search warrants and arresting six suspects in what was described as a "family-based" operation.

Indoor marijuana raids have become so common in quiet suburban neighborhoods of the region that they hardly merit headlines. But this operation was different, authorities say.

"This is a three-level home and backs up to an elementary school," Gordon Taylor, special agent in charge of the Sacramento office of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, said outside the home at 349 Arches Ave. "This is the first time we've seen this kind of operation in such a high-end neighborhood."

The home just west of El Dorado Hills Boulevard is up a hill from William Brooks Elementary School, 3610 Park Drive. Authorities said they found 798 marijuana plants inside.

As agents carried plants, growing lights and other equipment out of the home, children could be heard playing in the schoolyard just down the slope. Some neighbors, out for their morning walk with several dogs in tow, were shocked by the activity.

"You don't want to think that this is going on just a few doors down from your home," said Damon Williams.

An additional 507 plants were seized at a 2,892-square-foot home in Placerville. The residence at 888 Maria Vista Way is a three-bedroom, two-bath model valued at \$530,000.

Another raid at 3447 Woodleigh Lane in Cameron Park – 3 bedrooms, 2.5 baths, 3,458 square feet, \$635,000 – did not find an active growing operation, but investigators found equipment indicating it was being used to grow pot.

"The interesting thing about these homes is they're a bit different than what we encountered a few years ago in Elk Grove," Taylor said. "These are three-level homes, they appear to be using the lower level or basement area for their growing operation, while they're making sure the upper levels looked lived in."

Federal officials believe the people involved in these operations learned from pot-house busts in the Elk Grove area in 2006 and 2007 that sometimes occurred because neighbors noticed homes were not being lived in or had black curtains or plywood covering windows.

In Tuesday's case, authorities said, the suspects appeared to be making more of an effort to blend into the neighborhood.

"There is so much money to be made, especially from indoor operations," Taylor said.

Indoor growers can harvest four crops in a good year, compared to one grown outdoors. If they know what they're doing, the indoor crop will be much more potent, which means "you get a lot more money for the marijuana grown indoors," Taylor said.

In a year, an indoor grower may reap 2,000 pounds of pot that is now selling for about \$4,000 a pound, Taylor said. That's potentially \$8 million.

Indoor growers also are less bothered by deer, rats, hikers and DEA helicopters hovering above their garden, he said.

And sprawling homes in well-to-do neighborhoods are less likely to be detected.

"Larger houses are going to have a lot more room to grow and are going to have much higher regular utility bills, so that having a very high bill because of the grow lights won't be out of step with the neighbors," said Sacramento attorney William Portanova, a former federal prosecutor.

"And, quite frankly, from a crook's perspective, a nice neighborhood might be better because it's more secure."

Authorities declined to say exactly how they unraveled the growing operation. But they said Tuesday's targets are linked to two pot houses the DEA uncovered in Foresthill and Auburn in August and September 2007. Those busts were made at a home on Todd Valley Road in Foresthill and in the 1600 block of High Street in Auburn, Taylor said.

Taylor said the group "is a family-based organization out of Sacramento" and that agents seized \$384,000 in cash during Tuesday's raids.

Agents arrested Cuong The Le, 39, at the house on Arches Avenue. Minh Vinh Le, 31, and Wan Fang Fu, 27, were arrested at the house in Placerville. Tony Quy Le, 50, was arrested at his home at 4080 Monteverde Drive in Lincoln. Hung The Le, 45, was arrested at 8747 White Cedar Lane, Elk Grove. Tien The Le, 41, was arrested at 7101 Snowy Birch Way, Sacramento.

Agents also served search warrants at 8430 Auberry Lane and 8251 Grandstaff Drive, Sacramento, but no arrests were made.

Public records indicate various members of the Le family are local businessmen who have been involved in various restaurants in Sacramento, El Dorado and Placer counties. Attempts to contact several of the restaurants were unsuccessful; phone numbers for them had been disconnected.

But Portanova said his experience as a prosecutor showed him that restaurants and other largely cash operations are ideal for concealing proceeds from drug operations.

"With restaurants, it's very easy to launder money because there's so much waste, so much untraceable money being spent," he said. "In order to demonstrate that money is legitimate, it just simply has to be traceable through a legitimate source and provide a superficial appearance of legitimacy to an examiner.

"You invest pennies in bulk foods and turn around and claim you've sold it for thousands of dollars to customers. Who's to say you didn't, short of full-time surveillance?"

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