

Police say city safer after 18 raids in three days

BY JASON VAN RASSEL, CALGARY HERALD OCTOBER 1, 2011

Presented By:



Lynne and Jack Prestage speak to reporters Friday about their experiences after a grow op fire destroyed their home in Citadel in December 2009.

Photograph by: Grant Black, Calgary Herald, Calgary Herald

Jack and Lynne Prestage have moved into the house that replaced one destroyed by fire nearly two years ago, but they're still unsettled.

Theirs was one of eight homes in Citadel that were gutted in December 2009 when a fire was sparked by a marijuana grow operation hidden in a neighbour's house.

Insurance paid for a new home on the same spot, but the Prestages haven't completely regained the comfort they had before the fire forced them to flee their home in the middle of the night.

"I still struggle a little bit when I go to bed at night," Lynne Prestage said.

Authorities invited the Prestages to speak about the dangers of marijuana grow ops Friday as they revealed details of a three-day sweep that dismantled 18 illegal operations across Calgary.

Investigators estimated the 8,920 plants and 7.2 kilograms of harvested marijuana officers seized during the operation was potentially worth \$11.1 million.

"That's not the real story," said Insp. Kevin Forsen of Alberta Law Enforcement Response Teams, a provincial umbrella group targeting organized crime with nearly 400 members from municipal police, the RCMP and Alberta Sheriffs. "The true story is that with the work that went into this, we made 18 communities safer."

Indeed, the focus of Friday's announcement wasn't on the perils of using drugs: instead, authorities emphasized the dangers marijuana grow operations pose to neighbouring properties.

Since grow ops require large amounts of electricity, criminals commonly steal power by bypassing the electrical meter. In addition to being illegal, the makeshift wiring jobs often pose a fire hazard. Homes used for grow operations are often rendered uninhabitable by toxic mould caused by the high humidity used to grow the plants.

Holes bashed into walls and foundations to route wires, water and ventilation equipment can seriously compromise a home's structural integrity.

Of the 18 properties raided between Tuesday and Thursday, Alberta Health Services declared 14 of them unfit for human habitation.

"Fire safety is just one issue - any time you have organized crime right next door to you, it exposes you and your neighbours to danger," Forsen said.

Since marijuana is a major source of money for organized crime groups, they'll go to great lengths to protect their investment by booby-trapping and fortifying the grow houses, Forsen added.

Four of the 18 homes raided by police had weapons or booby traps, including one with a fortified back door connected to a pepper spray canister.

Another home was guarded by six surveillance cameras and had alarm sensors throughout - including one attached to the electrical box.

So far, police have laid drug charges against nine people found inside the homes they raided.

Child protection authorities seized four children between 18 months and seven years old from one of the houses. Because crime groups hire people to tend crops or act as proxy buyers or renters, Forsen said police are still seeking others connected to the grow operations.

Forsen said many of the raided homes were targeted after police followed up on tips from the public.

"The way we were able to identify these properties was through the support of the community," he said.

Grow operations need to be treated as a community problem and not just a policing problem, said Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart.

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