



## **PRESS RELEASE**

Colorado Department of Law  
Attorney General Cynthia H. Coffman

## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **THIRTY-TWO PERSON “LEGAL” MARIJUANA DRUG TRAFFICKING CONSPIRACY DISMANTLED**

*At least \$12 Million of Illegal Medical Marijuana Trafficked out of Colorado*

**DENVER**—The [Colorado Attorney General’s Office](#) was joined by other law enforcement agencies today to announce Colorado’s largest marijuana bust since legalization. Tri Trong Nguyen, with the support of his wife, three sisters, and dozens of co-conspirators, is alleged to have overseen a massive illegal interstate marijuana distribution network. For four years, Nguyen and 31 others held themselves out as medical marijuana patient caregivers, property managers servicing marijuana growers, as marijuana “cooperatives,” and small business owners while they trafficked tens of thousands of pounds of marijuana trim, concentrate, and butane hash oil out of state. Conservatively, the group laundered millions of dollars.

“This investigation shut down one of the largest and most sophisticated criminal enterprises uncovered since Colorado voters passed Amendment 20 in 2000. Nguyen’s drug ring is further evidence of Colorado’s thriving black market. Illegal drug dealers are simply hiding in plain sight, attempting to use the legalized market as a cover,” said Colorado Attorney General Cynthia H. Coffman.

In January 2014, the [Denver Police Department](#) responded to a citizen complaint and found an unlicensed marijuana grow warehouse. The operator, Michael Glick, claimed the “co-op” was legally growing 500-600 plants for five medical marijuana patients. The discovery set in motion a massive local, state, and federal law enforcement investigation. A search warrant executed in October led to law enforcement’s seizure of 4,600 pounds of marijuana, nearly 2,000 marijuana plants, 10 pounds of hash oil, and approximately \$1.4 million in cash.

“We are grateful to our state and federal partners who we worked with on the ‘Operation Golden Go-fer’ investigation,” said Denver Police Chief Robert White. “These partnerships and investigations go a long way to send the message to criminals who think the Denver area is the place to setup illegal marijuana operations. The Denver Police Department has a unit of dedicated detectives whose main objective is to stop illegal marijuana operations in our city and Denver does not tolerate these crimes in our city. ”

During the ring’s operation, Nguyen controlled the illegal cultivation and distribution of marijuana at 13 warehouses throughout Denver. He and his wife, Kristen Root, and sisters Josie Phuong Farrow, Shelia Thi Kieu Lorenz, and Oanh Tran, allegedly laundered the proceeds, avoiding the payment of taxes. They disguised their criminal activity through front companies that included a massage parlor and a purported property management company leasing commercial warehouse space to marijuana growers. The family converted cash from their illegal sales into money orders that they then deposited into bank accounts in amounts under \$3,000 to avoid triggering federal reporting requirements. The scam also allowed them to avoid payment of an estimated \$700,000 in excise taxes.

The conspiracy even utilized sky-diving planes to ship marijuana out of Colorado and return cash from illegal out-of-state sales. Joseph Johnson, one of the alleged conspirators, ultimately confessed to being a “go-fer” for the operation. Johnson’s sky-diving business owned planes and contracted pilots to fly them. In an arrangement with Nguyen, marijuana was harvested, packaged, and then shipped from Boulder to Minnesota aboard Johnson’s planes. On at least one occasion, the marijuana was driven to Texas.

“Federal, state and local law enforcement each have important roles to play to protect public safety and public health in the new marijuana landscape created by Colorado’s legalization of medical and recreational marijuana under state law,” said Colorado U.S. Attorney John Walsh. “This prosecution announced today demonstrates the strength of that multi-faceted approach. The Colorado Attorney General’s office is aggressively pursuing state criminal charges, while the [U.S. Attorney’s Office](#), working with the DEA, is engaged in pursuing federal asset forfeiture cases against assets being used to facilitate the conduct that is the subject of state criminal charges, and which violates both Colorado and federal law.”

“More and more criminals are moving to Colorado to exploit our state’s drug laws, sell marijuana throughout the United States, and line their pockets with drug money,” said Assistant Special Agent in Charge for the [Denver Field Division of the Drug Enforcement Administration](#) Keven R. Merrill. “DEA and our federal, state, and local partners will continue to investigate, arrest, and prosecute criminals who believe that Colorado is the marijuana capital of the country and use our state as their base of operations for their drug trafficking activities in other states.”

“At one point, Nguyen explored becoming a legitimate grower by merging his operations with a licensed dispensary,” said Coffman. “But when Nguyen was told he would have to cut down his existing marijuana crop and start the business again in accordance with Colorado law, he responded that he was making too much money doing what he was doing and he walked away from the deal – choosing the more lucrative black market over the white market. These loopholes must be closed. The investigation also revealed that the ring engaged in the hazardous production of illegal butane hash oil, putting themselves and anyone in their proximity in harm’s way.”

The defendants are charged with 52 felony counts and most are now under arrest awaiting trial dates in Denver District Court. They face charges that include violating the Colorado Organized Crime Control Act, illegal marijuana distribution, money laundering, tax evasion, contributing to a hazardous substance incident, and attempts to influence public servants.

In addition to the Colorado Attorney General's Office, The Denver Police Department, the U.S. Department of Justice, the Colorado Department of Revenue Criminal Tax Enforcement, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Parker Police Department and the Douglas County Sheriff's Office were all instrumental in the investigation.

The filing of criminal charges or an indictment is merely a formal accusation that an individual committed a crime. Each defendant should be presumed innocent until proven guilty. These cases will be prosecuted in Denver District Court by attorneys with the Criminal Justice Section of the Colorado Attorney General's Office.

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