

Medical marijuana's big business lures ex-law enforcers

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In this Sept. 29, 2015, photo, Scott Abbott, a retired Illinois State Police colonel, speaks with Mark Lewis, left, and Jeff Greer at the new medical marijuana dispensary being built in Collinsville, Ill. Abbott is the director of security and compliance with Health Central, Lewis is the director of finance and human resources for Health Central and Greer is with LRS Network Support. The Associated Press has identified no fewer than 17 former law enforcement or legal officials involved in the state's new business, from one-time undercover narcotics officers to an ex-Secret Secret senior executive. (Steve Nagy/Belleville News-Democrat via AP)

With fewer than 4,000 approved patients, the nascent medical marijuana business in Illinois is off to a slow start. Yet it hasn't kept away a cadre of cannabis entrepreneurs who once relied on guns, badges, tough drug laws and lengthy prison sentences to fight the drug.

While neither state regulators nor the medical marijuana industry track the number of employees who were former [law enforcement officials](#), The Associated Press has identified no fewer than 17 in Illinois, many of whom have outsized influence—from a trustee of the state's chapter of the Fraternal Order of Police to one-time undercover narcotics officers.

"Who better would you want to oversee your compliance than a cop?" said Scott Abbott, a retired Illinois State Police colonel paid to help a company adhere to the state's strict laws and regulations at two dispensaries.

The pull of such post-police jobs extends well beyond Illinois, such as Washington state and Colorado, where marijuana is legal for everyone over 21. But industry members in Illinois and beyond say the state is unusual in the degree to which former law enforcement officers are not just working security but taking hands-on roles with patients and leading businesses— even with the uncertain future of a four-year pilot program that expires in 2017 and has received lukewarm support from first-term Gov. Bruce Rauner.

Many have had a late-stage transformation, coming to see the drug less as a societal harm and more as good public policy—and good business. There's likely no better example than Terrance Gainer, a former Chicago homicide detective, Illinois State Police director, assistant police chief in Washington, D.C., U.S. Capitol police chief and U.S. Senate sergeant-at-arms.

After some initial reluctance, the 68-year-old said he was swayed in part

by "the sea change in society and our attitudes" toward the drug and the possibility of big business. He advises Chicago-based Green Thumb Industries on its security needs, has worked with prospective marijuana-business owners in Florida and New York and testified in support of the industry before Maryland lawmakers.

"The business people involved in this are very serious about their investments," he said.

Other players in Illinois include retired Will County Circuit Judge Robert Livas, co-founder of a company licensed to open two Chicago-area dispensaries who was once named judge of the year by the Illinois State Crime Commission. Another is a former Chicago-area assistant state's attorney who handled gang crimes and now is vice president of a company that owns a dispensary. There's also an ex-Cook County prosecutor-turned- general counsel of PharmaCannis, the state's single largest pot provider with four dispensaries and two indoor growing operations.



In this Aug. 13, 2014, file photo, security adviser Terrance Gainer, left, reviews security plans for a proposed medical marijuana facility with Kenneth Bouch, center, and Ben Kovler, right, of Green Thumb Industries, an Illinois-based partnership of medical marijuana entrepreneurs during a meeting in Chicago. Gainer, a former Chicago homicide detective and Illinois State Police director, is one of no fewer than 17 former law enforcement or legal officials involved in the business in Illinois, from one-time undercover narcotics officers to an ex-Secret Secret senior executive. (AP Photo/M. Spencer Green, File)

There's also Arnette Heintze, a former U.S. Secret Service senior executive who helped protect two presidents. Terry Hillard, Heintze's partner at the Chicago consulting firm that advises medical marijuana growers and retailers on security, spent five years as Chicago's top cop.

Retired U.S. Marshal's inspector Jim Smith said his private security company is "trying to corner the market" in medical marijuana

protection and armored transportation.

The law enforcement ties run especially deep in Collinsville, where Abbott is joined by a dispensary manager who also spent more than two decades with the highway patrol. Their commute is familiar—the soon-to-open HCI Alternatives dispensary is located next to the state police regional headquarters.

Former law enforcement officers proliferate in the states that pioneered the medical marijuana and legal marijuana businesses.

Denver Relief Consulting, which handles everything from business plan development to legislative advocacy, counts a retired Los Angeles County sergeant and Israeli National Security adviser among its top executives.

A Seattle-based medical marijuana investment firm lured Pat Moen, a 10-year Drug Enforcement Administration official, to join it in 2013.

"It's been incredibly rewarding," he said, estimating he's spoken with more than 100 current or former [law enforcement officers](#) about making a similar career transition. "This is a mainstream product sought my mainstream consumers."

Ben Percy, general manager of Trinity Compassionate Care Center in Peoria, switched careers after a 27-year stint with the Illinois State Police that included an assignment on a drug interdiction team that patrolled Interstate 55, which connects the Gulf of Mexico to the Great Lakes.

"We took quite a bit of money, drugs and criminals off the road," he said.

Percy and others draw a sharp distinction between [medical marijuana](#) and recreational use but also describe dramatic conversions borne from seeing the benefits of marijuana for the sickest of patients, including children with epilepsy or cancer-stricken relatives.

"I've done a total about-face on my views," he said.

Abbott and others noted that they're still involved in the business they were before—[law enforcement](#).

"I never got to pick and choose which laws I enforced ...This is the same thing," Abbott added. "It's legal right now. As long as they follow the law, I've got no problem with it."

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