

Marijuana grower sent to slammer

A man who cultivated marijuana at an old Norwalk restaurant building and in his Monroeville home was sentenced to 18 months in prison Thursday.

Thomas Sterling, 32, of 29 Milan Ave., also received a mandatory \$5,000 fine and had his driver's license suspended for six months. He forfeited the fans, grow lights and other marijuana cultivating equipment that authorities seized from the two locations March 12. Authorities have called it one of the largest growing operations in the Norwalk and Huron County area.

Sterling pleaded guilty July 23 to one count of cultivating marijuana in exchange for the dismissal of one charge each of possession of marijuana, tampering with evidence and possession of criminal tools.

"I'd like to apologize for my actions. I let down my family and my friends and especially my son. I lost sight of what's important to me," he said Thursday.

The Norwalk Police Department and Huron County Sheriff's Office investigated Sterling, who grew marijuana at the old Berardi's Catering building on Cleveland Road. The probe started in mid-March when police Detective Sgt. Seth Fry of the METRICH Enforcement Unit received information from a tipster, which sheriff's Detective Sgt. Josh Querin corroborated.

"This was a significant grow operation," which netted about 13 pounds of marijuana, Huron County Assistant Prosecutor Daivia Kasper said.

The prosecutor recommended a prison term on "the lower end" of the nine-month to three-year range that was possible. Kasper said the state wasn't opposed to Sterling being released early from prison and transferred into a community-based corrections facility, a form of prison which focuses on substance abuse treatment and education.

The largest plants were taller than 3 feet. Officers confiscated 78 marijuana plants and various lighting equipment from the old Berardi's on March 12. Sterling had been renting the eastern portion of the building. Firefighters gained entry for officers because there was a dead bolt on the door.

Police Detective Sgt. Jim Fulton earlier told the *Reflector* about what authorities found on Cleveland Road.

"You could smell (the marijuana) from the outside when we got here," he said. "There were 13 small plants. ... Most of them were mature -- ready to be harvested."

Multiple Norwalk officers and sheriff's deputies used a search warrant at Berardi's. About the same time, deputies used a warrant at Sterling's Monroeville home, where they seized three guns, various grow equipment, about \$220 in cash and various pieces of drug paraphernalia.

"He received some intelligence we were coming to his house and decided to discard the marijuana. ... Prior to our arrival, he had flushed marijuana down the toilet," Querin said.

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