U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20410-0500

OFFICE OF THE GENERAL COUNSEL

September 24, 1999

MEMORANDUM FOR: William C. Apgar, Assistant Secretary, Office of Housing/Federal Housing Commissioner, H

Harold Lucas, Assistant Secretary, Office of Public and Indian Housing, P

FROM: Gail W. Laster, General Counsel, G

SUBJECT: Medical use of marijuana in public housing

The Office of Housing requested our opinion with respect to whether a section 8 tenant's use of medical marijuana[1] requires an owner to terminate the tenancy of the medical marijuana user. It further inquired whether the cost of medical marijuana is deductible for purposes of determining adjusted income under applicable section 8 regulations.[2] Several HUD Field Offices have also requested guidance on this matter. Because these issues are also relevant to the public housing program and the section 8 programs operated by the Office of Public and Indian Housing, this memorandum is also addressed to that office. As more fully articulated below, we conclude that State laws purporting to legalize medical marijuana directly conflict with the admission and occupancy requirements of the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act of 1998 ("Public Housing Reform Act") and are thus subject to preemption.[3]

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[1] The term "medical marijuana" in this memorandum means marijuana which, when prescribed by a physician to treat a serious illness such as AIDS, cancer, or glaucoma, is legal under State law.

[2] These issues arose in the wake of Washington State's November 3, 1998 referendum in which voters approved the medical use of marijuana. According to the Office of National Drug Control Policy ("ONDCP"), the following States have enacted laws purporting to legalize medical marijuana to date: Alaska, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Nevada, Oregon, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington and, depending on the interpretation of the law in Louisiana, may also be legal there under certain circumstances. See ONDCP's web page, "Status of State Marijuana Initiatives" (copy attached).

[3] The Public Housing Reform Act amended the United States Housing Act of 1937 ("Act"), 42 U.S.C. § 1437. As more fully discussed below, it also contains four freestanding sections, sections 576

I. Admissions Standards

Section 576(b)(1) of the Public Housing Reform Act requires public housing agencies ("PHAs") and owners to establish standards that:

> ***prohibit*** admission to . . . federally assisted housing for any household with a member--
> (A) who the public housing agency or owner determines is illegally using a controlled substance; or
> (B) with respect to whom the public housing agency or owner determines that it has reasonable cause to believe that such a household member's illegal use (or pattern of illegal use) of a controlled substance . . . may interfere with the health, safety, or right to peaceful enjoyment of the premises by other residents.

42 U.S.C. §13661(b)(1) (emphasis added). We interpret the word "prohibit" in this context to mean that the admission standards which the statute prescribes require that PHAs and owners ***must*** deny admission to the first class of households, i.e., those with a member who the PHA or owner determines is, at the time of consideration for admission, illegally using a controlled substance.[4] See 64 Fed. Reg. 40262, 40270 (1999) (to be

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through 579, which apply across the board to all federally assisted housing. Three of these four sections, section 576 ("Screening of Applicants for Federally Assisted Housing"), section 577 ("Termination of Tenancy and Assistance for Illegal Drug Users and Alcohol Abusers in Federally Assisted Housing"), and section 579 ("Definitions"), govern the questions articulated above. They are codified in Chapter 135 ("Residency and Service Requirements in Federally Assisted Housing") of Title 42 of the United States Code, 42 U.S.C. §§ 13661, 13662, & 13664, rather than with the Act itself.

[4] None of the three applicable freestanding provisions identified in footnote 3 contains a definition of "controlled substance." Section 579(a)(1) of the Public Housing Reform Act, however, attributes the related phrase, "drug-related criminal activity," with the meaning specified in section 3(b) of the Act. 42 U.S.C. § 13664(a)(1). Section 3(b)(9) of the Act defines "drug-related criminal activity" as "the illegal manufacture, sale, distribution, use, or possession with intent to manufacture, sell, distribute, or use, of a controlled substance (as such term is identified in section 102 of the Controlled Substances Act.)" 42 U.S.C. § 1437b(9). The Controlled Substances Act in turn

codified at 24 C.F.R. §§ 5.853(a)(1)) (proposed July 23, 1999). Id. at 40274 (to be codified at 24 C.F.R. § 882.518(a)(1)(i).

With respect to the determination as to whether a person is illegally using a controlled substance, the Act does not indicate a minimum length of time that must have transpired since the last illegal use of a controlled substance for an applicant to be deemed eligible to receive Federal assistance. Legislative history to the Americans with Disabilities Act ("ADA"), which similarly excludes "current users of illegal drugs" from its protections, indicates that in excluding such persons from coverage, Congress intended to exclude persons "whose illegal use of drugs occurred recently enough to justify a reasonable belief that a person's drug use is current." H.R. Conf. Rep. No. 101-596, at 64, reprinted in 1990 U.S.C.C.A.N. 267, 573. See also, D'Amico v. City of New York, 955 F. Supp. 294, 298 (S.D. N.Y. 1997) (Rehabilitation Act's prohibition against current illegal use of controlled substances encompasses illegal uses occurring recently enough to justify reasonable belief that illegal drug use is current), aff'd 132 F.3d 145 (2d Cir.), cert. denied, 118 S.Ct. 2075 (1998). We thus interpret the Public Housing Reform Act's prohibitions against "current" illegal use of a controlled substance as encompassing uses occurring recently enough to warrant a reasonable belief that the use is ongoing.

The courts of appeal which have addressed this issue in cases brought under Federal civil rights statutes have reached different conclusions regarding the length of time that must have passed since the last instance of illegal use for a person not to be considered a "current" illegal user. Most agree, however, that the issue of whether or not a person is a "current" illegal user under Federal civil rights laws requires a highly individualized, fact-specific examination of all relevant circumstances. See, e.g., Shafer v. Preston Memorial Hospital, 107 F.3d 274, 278 (4th Cir. 1997) (employee whose last illegal use of drugs occurred three weeks prior to termination held to be "currently engaging in the illegal use of drugs" under ADA); Collins v. Longview Fibre Co., 63 F.3d 828, 833 (9th Cir. 1995) (passage of "months" between last illegal use of controlled

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defines "controlled substance" as "a drug or other substance, or immediate precursor, included in schedule I, II, III, IV, or V of part B of this subchapter." 42 U.S.C. § 802(6). Schedule I includes marijuana. 21 U.S.C. § 812(c) (Schedule I) (c)(10). We therefore attribute the latter definition of "controlled substance" to that phrase, as used in sections 576 and 577 of the Public Housing Reform Act. Sullivan v. Stroop, 496 U.S. 478, 484 (1990) ("identical words used in different parts of the same Act are intended to have the same meaning") (quoting Helvering v. Stockholms Enskilda Bank, 293 U.S. 84, 87 (1934)).

substance and termination held insufficient for employees to escape classification of current illegal users under ADA); United States v. Southern Management Corp., 955 F.2d 914, 918 (4th Cir. 1992) (persons drug-free for one year held not "current" users under Fair Housing Act). In any event, it is likely that when issues arise with respect to medical marijuana, the person in question will be currently using the controlled substance.

With respect to the second class of households addressed in section 576(b)(1)(B), i.e., those including a member for whom the PHA or owner determines that reasonable cause exists to believe that the member's pattern of illegal use of a controlled substance may interfere with other residents' health, safety, or right to peaceful enjoyment[5], section 576(b)(2) of the Public Housing Reform Act affords PHAs and owners limited discretion to admit such households. That section provides as follows:

> ***Consideration of Rehabilitation.***--In determining whether, pursuant to paragraph (1)(B), to deny admission to the program or federally assisted housing to any household based on a pattern of illegal use of a controlled substance or a pattern of abuse of alcohol by a household member, a public housing agency or an owner may consider whether such household member--
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> (A) has successfully completed a supervised drug or alcohol rehabilitation program (as applicable) and is no longer engaging in the illegal use of a controlled substance or abuse of alcohol (as applicable);
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> (B) has otherwise been rehabilitated successfully and is no longer engaging in the illegal use of a controlled substance or abuse of alcohol (as applicable); or
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> (C) is participating in a supervised drug or

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[5] Section 576(b)(1)(B) of the Public Housing Reform Act does not expressly limit the reasonable cause determination to ***past*** illegal use or a ***past and noncontinuing*** pattern of illegal use, of a controlled substance. But given section 576(b)(1)(A)'s prohibition against admitting any household with a member who the PHA or owner determines is illegally using a controlled substance, i.e., at the time of consideration for admission or recently enough to warrant a reasonable belief that a household member's illegal use is ongoing, we interpret section 576(b)(1)(B) to require PHAs and owners to deny admission to households based on a reasonable cause determination that the household member's ***past*** illegal use or ***past and noncontinuing*** pattern of illegal use of a controlled substance may interfere with other residents' health, safety, or right to peaceful enjoyment of the premises. 42 U.S.C. § 13661(b)(1)(B).

> alcohol rehabilitation program (as applicable) and is no longer engaging in the illegal use of a controlled substance or abuse of alcohol (as applicable).

42 U.S.C. § 13661(b)(2). A PHA or owner may admit such a household under this provision after having determined that both conditions in one of the three considerations enumerated above have been met, i.e., some evidence of drug rehabilitation and no current illegal use. See 64 Fed. Reg. at 40270 (to be codified at 24 C.F.R. § 5.860(a)). As with households including a member who the PHA or owner determines is illegally using a controlled substance, a PHA or owner may admit a household under section 576(b)(1)(B) on the condition that the household member for whom reasonable cause exists to believe that such person's past and noncontinuing illegal use may interfere with other residents' health, safety, or right to peaceful enjoyment, may not reside with the household or on the premises. 64 Fed. Reg. at 40270 (to be codified at 24 C.F.R. § 5.860(b)).

The law of preemption provides that "it is not necessary for a federal statute to provide explicitly that particular state laws are preempted." Hillsborough County v. Automated Medical Laboratories, Inc., 471 U.S. 707, 713 (1985). Moreover, a State statute "is invalid to the extent that it 'actually conflicts with a . . . federal statute.'" International Paper Co., v. Ouellette, 479 U.S. 481, 492 (1987) (quoting Ray v. Atlantic Richfield Co., 435 U.S. 151, 158 (1978). "Such a conflict will be found when the state law 'stands as an obstacle to the accomplishment and execution of the full purposes and objectives of Congress.'" Ouellette, 479 U.S. at 492 (quoting Hillsborough County, 471 U.S. at 713).

It is our opinion that State statutes which purport to legalize marijuana stand as such an obstacle to the accomplishment of the purpose of section 576(b)(1) of the Public Housing Reform Act, i.e., to require owners of federally assisted housing to "establish standards that prohibit admission to federally assisted housing" for the two categories of households identified in section 576(b)(1). To the degree that a PHA may look to these State laws for authorization to admit families with a member who is using medical marijuana on the grounds that under State law the use of medical marijuana is not the illegal use of a controlled substance, we believe that the PHA would not be in compliance with section 576. We therefore conclude, with regard to required standards prohibiting admission to federally assisted housing of households with members who are illegally using a controlled substance, that State medical marijuana statues which purport to remove medical marijuana from classification as a controlled substance are preempted by section 576 of the Public Housing Reform Act.

II. Termination of Tenancy and Assistance

With regard to existing public housing tenants and program participants, section 577(a) of the Public Housing Reform Act requires that PHAs and owners:

> establish standards or lease provisions for continued assistance or occupancy in federally assisted housing that ***allow*** the agency or owner . . . to terminate the tenancy or assistance for any household with a member--
>
> (1) who the public housing agency or owner determines is illegally using a controlled substance; or
>
> (2) whose illegal use (or pattern of illegal use) of a controlled substance . is determined by the [PHA] or owner to interfere with the health, safety, or right to peaceful enjoyment of the premises by other residents.

42 U.S.C. § 13662(a) (emphasis added). Unlike the prescribed admission standards, which "prohibit" admission of households identified in section 576(b)(1), the prescribed continued occupancy and assistance standards merely "allow" termination when a PHA or owner determines that a household member is illegally using a controlled substance or when a household member displays a past and noncontinuing pattern of illegal use which is determined by the PHA or owner to interfere with other residents' health, safety, or right to peaceful enjoyment. See 64 Fed. Reg. at 40274 (to be codified at 24 C.F.R. § 882.518(b)(1)(i)).

As discussed above, with respect to the classification of medical marijuana, Federal law preempts any discretion on the part of the PHA or owner from determining that medical marijuana is not a controlled substance. Therefore, an owner or PHA could not make a determination that use of medical marijuana per se is never grounds for termination of tenancy or assistance. And, consequently, could not establish standards or lease provisions that generally permit occupancy of Federally assisted housing by medical marijuana users.

That being said, the statute provides the PHA and the owner with the discretion to determine on a case-by-case basis when it is appropriate to terminate the tenancy or assistance of a household. The propriety of any decision to evict a household or to terminate assistance for past or current illegal use of a controlled substance, or for a stated or demonstrated intent by a resident prospectively to use medical marijuana, requires a highly individualized, fact-specific analysis that is tailored to the relevant circumstances of each case. See Southern Management Corp., 955 F.2d at 918; Forrisi v. Bowen, 794 F.2d 931, 933 (4th

Cir. 1986) (decided under Rehabilitation Act). It is therefore not practicable to articulate specific guidance which is relevant to all cases where a PHA is considering eviction or termination of assistance for past or current illegal use of a controlled substance or for a resident's stated or demonstrated intent prospectively to use medical marijuana.

In determining how to exercise the discretion which section 577 of the Public Housing Reform Act affords, however, PHAs and owners should be guided by the fact that historically, HUD has not extensively regulated the area of eviction and termination of assistance, leaving the ultimate determination of whether to evict or terminate assistance to their reasoned discretion. HUD intends that PHAs and owners utilize their discretion under section 577 to make consistent and reasoned determinations with respect to eviction and termination of assistance determinations. In cases where a household member states or demonstrates an intent prospectively to use medical marijuana, PHAs and owners should consider all relevant factors in determining whether to terminate the tenancy or assistance, including, but not necessarily limited to: (1) the physical condition of the medical marijuana user; (2) the extent to which the medical marijuana user has other housing alternatives, if evicted or if assistance were terminated; and (3) the extent to which the PHA or owner would benefit from enforcing lease provisions prohibiting the illegal use of controlled substances.

For households with a member who a PHA or owner determines to be illegally using a controlled substance or whose past and noncontinuing pattern of illegal use of a controlled substance is determined by the PHA or owner to interfere with other residents' health, safety, or right to peaceful enjoyment, the prescribed continued occupancy and assistance standards, like the prescribed admissions standards, must allow the PHA or owner to consider evidence of successful rehabilitation or current participation in a supervised drug rehabilitation program when determining whether to terminate tenancy or assistance to such a household. Section 577(b).

Again as discussed above with respect to section 576, State statutes which purport to legalize medical marijuana directly conflict with the quoted provisions of section 577 of the Public Housing Reform Act insofar as they purport to remove marijuana, when used pursuant to a physician's prescription, from the Controlled Substances Act's list of controlled substances. The limited discretion which section 577 affords PHAs and owners to refrain from terminating the tenancy of or assistance for illegal drug use, however, does not include any discretion to determine that marijuana is not a controlled substance within the meaning of the Controlled Substances Act, 21 U.S.C. § 812(b)(1)(c), even if a State statute purports to legalize its use for medical purposes.

If enforced, such laws would "stand[] as an obstacle to the accomplishment and execution of the full purposes and objectives of Congress" in enacting section 577 of the Public Housing Reform Act, i.e., to require that PHAs and owners "establish standards which allow them to terminate the tenancy or assistance" for either class of households identified in section 577(a). Ouellette, 479 U.S. at 492 (quoting Hillsborough County, 471 U.S. at 713). If given effect, such laws would operate to divest PHAs and owners of the discretion which Congress intended them to have regarding termination of tenancy or assistance for use of a controlled substance. We thus conclude that State medical marijuana statutes, insofar as they may be interpreted to mean that use of medical marijuana is not the illegal use of a controlled substance, are preempted by section 577 of the Public Housing Reform Act.

III. Conclusion

Based on this analysis, we conclude that PHAs and owners must establish standards that require denial of admission to households with a member whom the PHA or owner determines to be illegally using a controlled substance, or for whom it determines that reasonable cause exists to believe that a household member's pattern of illegal use of a controlled substance may interfere with other residents' health, safety, or right to peaceful enjoyment. Section 576(b). The Public Housing Reform Act affords PHAs and owners limited discretion to admit households with a member for whom such a reasonable cause determination is made in the face of evidence of rehabilitation. Section 576(b)(2). HUD's proposed rule would further allow a PHA or owner to impose as a condition to admission a requirement that "any household member who engaged in or is culpable for the drug use . . . may not reside with the household or on the premises." 64 Fed. Reg. at 40270 (to be codified at 24 C.F.R. § 5.860(b)). Because State medical marijuana laws, insofar as they may be interpreted to mean that use of medical marijuana is not the illegal use of a controlled substance, directly conflict with the objective of the Public Housing Reform Act's requirements regarding admissions, they are preempted.

We further conclude that PHAs and owners must establish standards or lease provisions for continued assistance or occupancy which allow termination of tenancy or assistance for any household with a member who the PHA or owners determines to be illegally using a controlled substance or whose past and noncontinuing pattern of illegal use of a controlled substance is determined by the PHA or owner to interfere with other residents' health, safety, or right to peaceful enjoyment. The Public Housing Reform Act affords PHAs and owners limited discretion to refrain from terminating the tenancy or assistance for any household with a member for whom such a determination is made in the face of evidence of rehabilitation. Section 577(b). HUD's

proposed rule would further allow a PHA or owner to impose as a condition for continued assistance a requirement that "any household member who engaged in or is culpable for the drug use . . may not reside with the household or on the premises." 64 Fed. Reg. at 40270 (to be codified at 24 C.F.R. § 5.860(b)).

The standards which section 577 requires must also allow PHAs and owners to terminate the tenancy of or assistance to a household with a member who states or demonstrates an intent prospectively to use medical marijuana. In determining whether to exercise their discretion to evict or terminate assistance for such a household, PHAs and owners should consider all relevant factors particular to each case, including, but not necessarily limited to: (1) the physical condition of the medical marijuana user; (2) the extent to which the medical marijuana user has other housing alternatives, if evicted or it assistance were terminated; and (3) the extent to which the PHA or owner would benefit from enforcing lease provisions that prohibit illegal use of controlled substances.

With regard to the Office of Housing's question concerning the deductibility of the cost of medical marijuana, the Internal Revenue Service has already concluded, based on the premise that marijuana is a Federally controlled substance for which there are no legal uses, that the cost of medical marijuana is not a deductible medical expense. Rev. Ruling 97-9, 1997-9 I.R.B. 4, 1997 WL 61544 (I.R.S.). While for the purposes of HUD's assisted housing programs, PHAs and owners are not technically bound by the IRS Revenue Ruling, consistent with the conclusions in this memorandum, we believe that PHAs and owners should be advised that they may not allow the cost of medical marijuana to be considered a deductible medical expense.