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Bill targets 'grow house' operators

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FLORDIA CAPITAL BUREAU

Operators of "grow houses" used to cultivate marijuana plants in a protected indoor setting face increased penalties under a bill that passed a major House panel Wednesday.

Sponsored by Rep. Nick Thompson, R-Fort Myers, the bill (HB 173) takes the number of plants needed for a significant trafficking charge down from 300 plants to 25. If children are living in the house, it also makes the penalty an automatic first-degree felony.

Many growers hire low-income families to stay at the house and grow the illegal plants, Thompson said, and the danger to children and infants is terrifying.

Thompson showed photos of a Lehigh Acres grow house that was the scene of a home invasion gun battle in the last year to members of the House Safety and Security Council. The enhanced photos showed the bullets' trajectory, and the bullet holes in the walls, just inches above a baby's crib.

"When children and babies are endangered, this crime is especially terrible," Thompson said.

A release from Thompson said grow houses are increasingly a problem. "Florida is only outnumbered by California in the amount of grow houses. As of 2006, law enforcement uncovered marijuana grow houses in 41 of Florida's 67 counties"

The bill has support of several law enforcement groups, and passed the committee unanimously and with no questions asked. Next it advances to the House Policy & Budget Council.

The Senate companion, sponsored by Sen. Steve Oelrich, R-Cross Creek, still faces committee scrutiny in that chamber.
