

Jail time hard on pot bust suspect

By Megan Clark
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Vietnamese immigrant and naturalized U.S. citizen Thu Dang has never been convicted of a crime — even a parking violation — in her 23 years in this country.

But since late December, according to her attorney, Dang has spent 23 hours a day in an isolation cell, her hands cuffed behind her and her legs in shackles.

Lawyer Tam L. Knight said her client has been allowed no visits — her adult daughter was turned away at the prison doors — no mail and no phone calls, and is served all of her meals in her cell. When she was permitted to exercise for an hour a day, two prison guards escorted Dang.

Along with her husband, Tam Ha, 29, and another Vietnamese man, Meng Le, Dang was arrested Dec. 22 after police responding to repeated 911 phone calls, discovered an estimated \$2 to \$4 million in marijuana in two West Haven houses, including the one she and Ha live in.

"I was shocked. I have been doing this for 14 years and I have never seen anything like it," Knight said in an interview late Monday afternoon. "Actually, I have seen something like it. I've seen similar conditions for people who are convicted of murder ... She was treated worse than a convicted murderer."

The three co-defendants each face 18 drug-related charges, including two counts each of running a drug factory. Dang's bail was initially set at \$2 million.

Knight said Dang had no idea what was going on in her own house. The mother of two adult daughters who are attending college, and a baby, Knight said, Dang worked 13-plus hour days, seven days a week, at her manicure and makeup business.

"I was kept from her in the basement. Her husband ruled the roost," Knight said.

Ha also insisted to police, according to court documents, that Dang knew nothing about the illicit operation, which included 43 marijuana plants, 46 grow-lights and 58 converters.

Arguing before Superior Court Judge Stuart Bear in Milford Monday, Knight was successful in getting Dang's bail reduced to \$49,900 cash or surety. After the hearing, Knight said Dang's adult daughters, who live in California, hope to raise the funds to get their mother out. Until then, the lower bail means Dang will be able to socialize, go to school and receive phone calls while in prison.

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Bear also reduced bail for Le from \$4 million to \$200,000, after Le's attorney, Hugh F. Keefe, argued that the purpose of bail is to assure a defendant's appearance in court, not to insure that he remains incarcerated until trial.

Like Dang, Keefe said, Le has no criminal record and has lived in Connecticut since fleeing Vietnam in the early 1980s.

"Mr. Le has no money. None. Zero," Keefe said. "This is a marijuana case. The state will certainly say that yes, that is a lot of marijuana, but it's a marijuana case."

Assistant State's Attorney Mark Lawlor argued unsuccessfully to keep the bonds at the level they had been set at earlier, saying the charges, if proven, carry mandatory prison time.

"This is the largest seizure of marijuana in the city of West Haven," he said.

But Knight and Keefe suggested they would try to get the bonds, such as the marijuana, thrown out of court because of the way the search of the home was

conducted.

According to Keefe, police responding to 911 calls at the home claim the occupants, who used an interpreter in court Monday, consented to a search of the house. Police then applied for a warrant to seize the contraband after their initial warrantless search, Keefe said.

"For honor, this warrant — it smells," Knight said.

Police responding to repeated 911 calls found marijuana growing in the basement of the house at 307 Center St. and in much larger quantities on the second floor and in the attic of the house at 136 Washington Ave., as well as in that house's basement. It is still unclear who placed the calls.

Le's attorney, Hugh F. Keefe