

Effort to wipe out heroin in E. Tenn.

Campaign targets Mexican supply line and suburban users/dealers

By Jamie Satterfield

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The numbers don't lie.

Twenty-seven days. More than 10,000 orders for — at a minimum — 40 something pounds of heroin.

The ugly truth: East Tennessee's suburbia is chock-full of junkies.

If federal court records are any indication, it wasn't the homeless dialing up this Mexican cartel-based one-stop heroin shop. It wasn't the poor. It wasn't the uneducated. It wasn't the minority population.

These drug users are the sons and daughters of white and often well-to-do suburbanites who turned to smack when the dope they pilfered from mom and dad's medicine cabinet just couldn't pack the same punch. And they're not just using heroin. They're selling it.

It is against this backdrop that Assistant U.S. Attorneys David Jennings and Tracee Plowell have launched a new effort to not only shut down the Mexican supply line, but dent, if not dry up, demand by targeting street-level dealers.

The campaign is revealed in two separate indictments returned by a federal grand jury in the past few weeks.

One targets Angel "Eddie" Contreras, the alleged chief trader of horse, as heroin is sometimes called; his alleged deliveryman, Gerardo "Carlos" Mora Lopez; and four alleged suburbanite partners, Spencer White, Lindsey Roberts, and husband-and-wife team Travis Hickson and Jennifer Oxford Hickson.

Within days of his release to a halfway house for drug treatment, Travis Hickson fled, records show. Authorities believe his wife went on the lam with him.

The other indictment zeroes in on the alleged heroin users/dealers. Two of a half-dozen or so named in that indictment made appearances before U.S. District Magistrate Judge Bruce Guyton last week.

One, Mark Hampton, declared himself in the throes of withdrawal symptoms so severe that the U.S. Marshals Service outfitted him not only in cuffs and shackles, but also with a barf bag. The other, Bradley Michael Mars, identified himself as a Lincoln Memorial University student. He burst into tears when he saw his mother in the courtroom. He gasped aloud when Jennings announced that he faced an automatic 10-year prison term if convicted.

Just a few years ago, Jennings remarked at a hearing for another rich white kid facing prison for dealing heroin that it was his first brush with that retro drug since joining the U.S. Attorney's Office more than a decade before.

It would not be his last.

In fact, this newest probe by the FBI, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and others is round three in what is fast proving to be an unstoppable epidemic.

Twice now, authorities have plucked off the streets suppliers believed to be linked to a Mexican cartel. But more members quickly stepped in to fill the growing demand.

Just how big is the problem? Consider these tidbits from a criminal complaint drafted by DEA Task Force Agent Matthew J. Estridge:

An informant tipped authorities in February that "he had been purchasing small quantities of heroin using the telephone from an individual who sounded as if he was of Mexican descent," Estridge wrote. "The person answering the call — the dispatcher — went by the name Eddie. Eddie would take the informant's order and dispatch another individual of Mexican descent to deliver the heroin."

It wasn't quite the quick sell of crack on an inner-city street corner, but it was close.

"Often the customer would simply ask, 'Can I meet you?'" the complaint states. "Eddie would respond, for example, 'Wal-Mart, Walker Springs, in 20 minutes,' or, 'Lovell Road in 20 minutes.' Once at the location, Carlos would serve the customer, removing small balloons containing heroin from his mouth and handing it to the customer."

Law enforcers used informants to make 13 heroin purchases from March to July. They used evidence from those buys to win approval from U.S. District Judge Tom Varlan to tap the heroin sales phone line.

Over the next 27 days, authorities logged more than 10,000 calls from heroin seekers. Typical transactions involved 1 to 2 grams of the opiate at a time. Some involved more.

"One particular customer told Eddie that he has been buying 15 grams per week from the organization," Estridge wrote.

Authorities nabbed Contreras in late September. It's not clear where, but a document filed by Jennings notes evidence from a raid on a room at a Super 8 motel in Knoxville. Other court records show evidence of alleged drug money being wired to Nayarit, Mexico.

In perhaps a testament of the suburban, upper-class clientele for this flashback drug, Jennings also listed among evidence seized an item one typically does not find in crack houses, meth labs or pot barns: "a poem of drug addiction."