

Department of Justice

Acting United States Attorney Kathleen M. Mehlretter
Western District of New York

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CONTACT: Peggy Kelly McFarland
PHONE: (716) 843-5877
FAX: (716) 551-3051

24 NIAGARA FALLS RESIDENTS ARRESTED ON FEDERAL AND STATE DRUG TRAFFICKING CHARGES

BUFFALO, N.Y. - Acting United States Attorney Kathleen M. Mehlretter, Niagara County District Attorney Michael Violante, Niagara Falls Police Superintendent John C. Chella, Drug Enforcement Administration Resident Agent in Charge Charles Tomazewski and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives Resident Agent in Charge David DeJoe jointly announce that commencing at 6:00 this morning, Niagara Falls police officers, and DEA and ATF agents, assisted by New York State Police officers, deputies from the Niagara County Sheriff's Department, the United States Marshal's Violent Felony Warrant Task Force, New State Parole Officers, Town of Tonawanda, Amherst, and Hamburg Police officers, Buffalo Police Officers, and deputies from the Erie, Chatauqua, Orleans and Cattaraugus County Sheriffs Departments began the arrests of 24 Niagara Falls men on federal and state narcotics trafficking charges.

In addition, the officers executed fourteen (15) search warrants in the City of Niagara Falls. Although, the evidence seized in these search warrants has not yet been fully inventoried, the officers seized substantial quantities of crack cocaine, currency, numerous items of drug paraphernalia and drug records. The seized items will be analyzed to determine if additional charges should be brought against any of the individuals arrested, or if additional individuals should be charged.

Attached to this release is a listing of the individuals charged and arrested, their ages, the charges against each (and the maximum penalty each defendant is facing) and the locations the officers either searched or are in the process of searching. Those arrested are currently being processed through the courts. Several of those arrested on federal charges have prior drug convictions and thus face enhanced sentences in federal court upon conviction. In addition to the drug charges on the attached list, Kurtel Walker, 21, of Niagara Falls was also arrested for possessing and selling a sawed-off shotgun and Steffon Dickerson, 19, was also charged by indictment with possession of crack cocaine with intent to distribute, but was already in the custody of the New York State Division of Corrections. Dickerson will be brought from state custody in the next few days for arraignment.

These arrests and searches are the culmination of a nearly year-long joint investigation by the Narcotics Division of the Niagara Falls Police Department, the DEA and the ATF, which focused on the sale of crack cocaine by persons identifying themselves as "Bloods" or associates of "Bloods". The New York State Police also assisted by providing an officer from the State Police Community Narcotics Enforcement Team ("CNET") to work

in an undercover capacity. The use of gang colors (red), signs and hand signals were observed by law enforcement on the streets of Niagra Falls during the course of the investigation and on various My Space accounts that related to some of the arrested defendants.

Niagara Falls Police Department Superintendent Chella stated that, based on the scope of the associations of those arrested and their criminal past, these arrests will have an instant impact on not only the drug trafficking market but the incidents of violent and gun-related crime in Niagara Falls. "I would like to thank all those agencies that participated in not only securing the indictments and search warrants, but helped in their execution. As the Superintendent of Police, I am very pleased with the results today and anticipate the streets of Niagara Falls being safer in the immediate future."

Superintendent Chella further stated that the investigation was commenced after officers from his department noticed individuals in several high crime neighborhoods wearing paraphernalia (red hats, red clothing, and red bandanas hanging from belt loops) associated with the Bloods, a gang that has its roots in Southern California. These individuals were observed by Niagara Falls Police Officers associating with suspected crack cocaine traffickers and these same individuals were suspected of selling crack cocaine through the network the gang had established.

Acting U.S. Attorney Mehlretter stated this investigation and today's actions by law enforcement are yet another example of the joint effort of federal, state, and local law enforcement to remove persons involved in narcotics and in the trafficking of illegal firearms in our communities.

District Attorney Violante stated that today's arrests are the result of a joint effort of local and federal law enforcement agencies. This investigation proves, once again, the commitment of city, county, state and federal law enforcement agencies to send the message this community will not tolerate gang activities, including drug trafficking and gun possession.

The cases brought in federal court are being prosecuted by supervisory Assistant U.S. Attorney William J. Hochul, Jr. and Assistant U.S. Attorneys Timothy J. Lynch, Charles B. Wydysh and Anthony M. Bruce. The cases brought in Niagara County are being prosecuted by Assistant District Attorneys Susan B. Bjornholm and Peter M. Wydysh.

The fact that a defendant has been charged with a crime is merely an accusation and the defendant is presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty.