

Wiretap investigation yields more than 30lbs of Fentanyl in Boston-area

Suffolk County District Attorney Daniel F. Conley, Boston Police Superintendent in Chief William Gross, Special Agent in Charge Michael J. Ferguson of the Drug Enforcement Administration's New England Division, Braintree Police Chief Paul Shastany, and Randolph Police Chief William Pace today announced the results of Operation High Hopes, one of the longest, most far-reaching, and most successful state wiretap investigations in Massachusetts history.

The investigation dismantled two Boston-area drug trafficking organizations and led to the seizure of some 77 pounds of various narcotics – including more than 30 pounds of fentanyl, an opiate so powerful that mere milligrams can be lethal – and some \$300,000 in alleged drug money. The fentanyl, heroin, cocaine, and opiate tablets are believed to have come from the Sinaloa Cartel in Mexico.

“I want to be clear about the size and scope here,” District Attorney Conley said. “Massachusetts’ fentanyl trafficking statute covers quantities greater than 10 grams. That threshold represents less than 1/1000th of the quantity we’ve taken off the street. The number of actual milligram-level doses in 15 kilograms is in the millions. And the number of overdoses it could have caused is truly staggering. Individuals who buy and sell at this level aren’t users. They’re not small time dealers, either. They’re certainly not selling to support a habit. They’re trafficking in addictive substances that claim more lives in Massachusetts than all homicides, all suicides, and all car crashes, statewide, combined.”



“Those suffering from the disease of opioid addiction need access to treatment and recovery,” said DEA Special Agent in Charge Michael J. Ferguson. “But those responsible for distributing lethal drugs like fentanyl to the citizens of Massachusetts need to be held accountable for their actions. DEA’s top priority is combatting the opioid epidemic by working with our local, county and state law enforcement partners to bring to justice those that distribute this poison.”

“These arrests and seizures will have a tremendous impact on the quality of life in Boston and many other Massachusetts cities and towns,” said Boston Police Commissioner William B. Evans. “The individuals arrested are responsible for pumping dangerous drugs into our communities, while profiting on the vulnerability of those suffering from the disease of addiction. I commend the work of my detectives and all our law enforcement partners who worked tirelessly over the past six months of Operation High Hopes. These partnerships area a tremendous benefit to law enforcement and the communities we serve, as they provide the resources needed to conduct this type of large-scale operation and keep our cities safe and free from drugs.”

The initial targets of the investigation – EDWARD SOTO-PEREZ, 43, of Roxbury; NELSON CATALA-OTERO, 37, of Brockton; and JULIO CUELLO, 52, of Dorchester – were arraigned in November on multiple drug trafficking charges after the execution of wiretap-based search warrants. They were held on bails ranging from \$100,000 to \$250,000 and will return to court on Feb. 13.

Their alleged supplier, ROBERT CONTRERAS, 42, of Roxbury, was one of more than a dozen additional targets arrested today. He arraigned in the Boston Municipal Court and held on \$1 million bail and will return to court on Feb. 28.

At a briefing this afternoon, Conley laid out the investigation.

“This investigation began in July 2017. The Boston Police Special Investigations Unit and DEA Task Force Two were attempting to make inroads into a suspected trafficking organization run by Edward Soto-Perez. Using cooperating witnesses, controlled purchases, physical surveillance, and other means, they had reliable evidence that he was a kilogram-weight trafficker – but they hit a wall in determining where he stored his supply or who his supplier was.

“Soto-Perez was clever and extremely diligent in covering his tracks. He used couriers to make deliveries and take cash payments. He switched cars regularly to foil court-authorized GPS tracking. And he would make as many as five sudden turns in the span of a mile to spot police surveillance teams. In fact, he was so adept at protecting his suppliers and stash houses that I took the rare step of approving a wiretap application to get that critical evidence. That first application was granted in September 2017 only after careful review by a Superior Court judge – under all the rules and restrictions of state and federal law.

“It’s a frustrating quirk of Massachusetts law that it’s easier to get a wiretap in a narcotics investigation than a murder investigation. Our Governor, Attorney General, and Chief Justice of the SJC all agree that this tool would help solve the armed robberies, shootings, and homicides frequently driven by the drug trade, in addition to the drug trade itself. And I think all of us here would urge the Legislature to lift that archaic restriction. But based on what investigators knew about the Soto-Perez Group, there was no question that a wiretap was the appropriate next step.

“In the months that followed, the court extended the wiretap 11 times and approved interceptions on more than two dozen

phones. Investigators doubled as codebreakers to reveal the criminal enterprise as it unfolded. In some calls, the defendants referred to drug shipments as “musicians” and to payments as ‘tickets’ to the party. In others, they discussed purity levels by referring to a kilogram of cocaine as a ‘car’ that could fit ‘three passengers’ – a highly potent original product that could be quadrupled in retail weight with cutting agents.

“Ironically, the wiretap that Soto-Perez’ precautions made necessary revealed facts and evidence we might never have obtained otherwise. It identified his partners and led to search warrants on their stash houses in Dorchester. But most importantly, it identified his supplier – Robert Contreras and his drug trafficking organization.

“We allege that the Contreras Organization worked with members of the Sinaloa Cartel, one of the most powerful drug trafficking organizations in the world, who imported huge quantities of narcotics into the northeastern United States. In fact, we believe they were so high in the distribution structure that the next level up would take us outside the United States. Evidence suggests that the Contreras Organization would receive those cartel narcotics and distribute them to the Soto-Perez Group and others, who would in turn supply lower-level dealers.

“Our goal in these cases isn’t simply to make arrests. It’s not just to build cases. It’s to disrupt an industry that causes addiction, overdose, and death. For low-level drug users, our emphasis was and remains treatment and diversion, because addiction isn’t a crime – it’s a treatable medical condition. But top-level drug trafficking groups like these are a different matter. They cause real harm to real people, real families, and real communities. There is no doubt in my mind that by dismantling their trafficking infrastructure at the highest level possible, this operation has saved hundreds of lives.”