



# Department of Justice

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**REMARKS AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY BY ATTORNEY GENERAL ERIC  
HOLDER AT THE OPERATION PILL NATION II ANNOUNCEMENT**

TAMPA, FLA.

Today marks an important step forward in our nation's ongoing fight against one of the greatest public safety and public health epidemics of our time: prescription drug abuse. Along with three key leaders in this fight – DEA Administrator Michele Leonhart, United States Attorney for the Middle District of Florida Robert O'Neill, and Florida's Attorney General Pamela Bondi – and with all of the federal, state, and local partners standing behind us – I am here to announce the results of *Operation Pill Nation II*: the U.S. government's latest effort to target every aspect of the prescription drug supply chain, including the operators of rogue pain clinics, and unethical physicians and pharmacists.

This morning, law enforcement efforts led by the DEA and the U.S. Attorney's Office here in Tampa have resulted in the arrests of 22 individuals – including 5 doctors and 2 pharmacists. This work builds on the success of the first *Operation Pill Nation*, which was launched last year to target rogue pain clinics in South Florida. As of today, these two operations have led to 118 arrests, the surrender of more than 80 DEA registrations, and the seizure of more than \$19 million in assets; and they have helped to bring about the closure of at least 40 Florida pain clinics.

Our targeted, aggressive enforcement actions are sending a clear message that – here in Florida, which has long been the nation's epicenter for the illegal distribution of prescription drugs – the days of easily acquiring these drugs from corrupt doctors and pharmacists are coming to an end.

And this progress hasn't come a moment too soon.

Today, prescription drug abuse is the fastest-growing drug problem in the county – and contributes to nearly 40,000 deaths and almost \$200 billion in health-care costs annually. It's estimated that, nationwide, approximately 7 million people regularly use prescription drugs for non-medical purposes; and that, in the past year alone, one in seven teens abused prescription drugs to get high.

Over the last decade, fatal poisonings involving drugs like oxycodone and methadone have more than tripled. And prescription drugs now cause more overdose deaths than "street drugs" such as cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine.

Here in Florida, the problem has reached crisis proportions. Between 2005 and 2010, the number of oxycodone-related deaths in this state increased by 345 percent. That's right, 345 percent. And, last year, of the estimated 53 million oxycodone doses sold to medical practitioners in the United States, more than 85 percent were purchased here in Florida.

The proliferation of "pill mills" we've seen across Florida in recent years has had a devastating impact far beyond this state. And prosecuting these operations – wherever they spread – has become a Department priority. In addition to the *Pill Nation* operations, just last month, the United States Attorney in Connecticut announced the arrests of 20 people – including three TSA agents and a Florida Highway Patrol Officer – for channeling tens of thousands of oxycodone pills from Florida to Connecticut.

As this – and our latest operations – show, we are fighting back. And, despite the size and scope of the problem before us, I believe that there is good cause for optimism.

When it comes to reducing prescription drug abuse, research has proven that targeted law enforcement efforts work. In addition to our strong focus on enforcement, the Justice Department also has taken steps to advance education, treatment, and policy solutions. And, all across the country, this work is making a difference.

By providing law enforcement with the tools, support, and information-sharing capabilities necessary to investigate drug sources, we've become more effective than ever at disrupting the trafficking of prescription drugs. One promising approach to choking off the supply chain is the deployment of DEA Tactical Diversion Squads, which maximize federal, state, and local law enforcement resources. These squads have taken our efforts to shut down "pill mill" pain clinics, prescription forgery rings, and illegal online pharmacies to a new level. They're currently operating in 40 cities, including Tampa, Miami, and – I'm pleased to announce – Orlando.

In addition to advancing investigations and prosecutions, we're also focused on prevention. Through outreach efforts like the DEA's Red Ribbon campaign, and the development of new educational programs, we're working to raise awareness about the signs and dangers of prescription drug abuse. We're also helping law enforcement officers connect directly with doctors – and enabling physicians to utilize the information available from state Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs, which are among our most effective tools in preventing patients from "doctor shopping."

But physicians aren't the only supply source. Recent surveys show that more than half of those who admit to abusing prescription painkillers said they got drugs "from a friend or relative for free" – and not from their doctor. Without question – getting old, unused, or expired drugs out of our medicine cabinets is critical. That's why, beginning last September, the DEA has sponsored two Prescription Drug Take Back Events. During the last two "Take Backs," more

than 300 tons of prescription drugs were collected nationwide. And our next one will be held tomorrow.

At more than 5,000 collection sites across the country – including one at Tampa’s Museum of Science and Industry – people will be able to drop off prescription drugs to be disposed of safely, at no cost and with no questions asked. And I urge all of you to help us spread the word.

In addition to effective drug prevention and treatment programs, we must also support regulatory and policy improvements – just like the ones we’ve seen here in Florida.

Thanks to the leadership and advocacy efforts of many of the people in this room, as of September 1<sup>st</sup>, Florida law now prohibits doctors and clinics from dispensing pain medicine on-site – and requires patients to go to a pharmacy to fill their prescriptions. Regulatory changes have also allowed doctors to access more up-to-date information on this state’s Prescription Drug Monitoring Program.

As a result of these improvements, in recent weeks, we’ve seen a dramatic decline in oxycodone prescriptions and sales. However, DEA has also seen a drastic spike in the number of new pharmacy applications, often from those totally unqualified to own and operate them. These applications are being reviewed carefully – and those that, in the past, would have become little more than “pill mills” are being denied.

The state of Florida – once the leading source of America’s prescription drug problem – is now becoming part of the solution. And, together, we’re proving that changes in state laws, accompanied by robust enforcement, can achieve powerful results – and help to alter dangerous behaviors.

As progress continues to be made here in Florida – and across the country – I want to assure you that the Justice Department’s commitment to preventing and combating prescription drug abuse will continue. And, for as long as they’re needed, aggressive takedown operations like *Pill Nation I* and *II* will be an integral part of our work. I want to thank everyone involved in these operations for their outstanding contributions, and for their ongoing efforts in addressing – and overcoming – the problem of prescription drug abuse.

And, now, I’d like to turn things over to DEA Administrator [Michele] Leonhart.

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