

Department of Justice

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Western District of New York

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BUFFALO POLICE OFFICER, THREE CO-DEFENDANTS INDICTED FOR OPERATING A LARGE SCALE MARIJUANA GROW OPERATION

BUFFALO, N.Y. -- U.S. Attorney William J. Hochul, Jr. announced today that Jorge Melendez, Jason Elardo, Robert Osika and Gale Elardo were charged in a 10 count Indictment with conspiracy to manufacture more than 1000 marijuana plants, manufacturing more than 100 marijuana plants, maintaining a premises for drug purposes, and possessing marijuana with the intent to sell it. The charges carry a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years in prison, a maximum of life, a fine of \$8,000,000 or both.

Defendants Jason Elardo and his wife, Gale Elardo, were also charged with possessing firearms in furtherance of drug trafficking for firearms located in their residence in close proximity to marijuana packaged for sale. This charge carries an additional mandatory minimum sentence of five years in prison, a maximum of life, a fine of \$250,000 or both. If convicted, the sentence would run consecutive to any other imposed sentence.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Melissa M. Marangola, who is handling the case, stated that on May 31, 2012, Melendez, Jason Elardo and Osika were arrested after a long term investigation into a large scale marijuana grow operation at three locations. Specifically, Elardo and Melendez are accused of maintaining a marijuana grow operation at the warehouse located at 2157 South Park Ave. in Buffalo. During the course of an investigation into the cultivation and distribution of marijuana, law enforcement officers installed hidden surveillance equipment on the second floor of the South Park Ave. warehouse where a grow operation was located. According to the court documents, Melendez and co-conspirator Elardo were observed tending to over 100 marijuana plants.

Prior to installing cameras inside the warehouse, officers monitored the outside of the building, also using surveillance cameras. According to the court documents, Melendez was observed arriving in a Buffalo Police patrol car, while on duty, and entering and exiting the

location. The defendant works in the Buffalo Police Department's "D" District, however the warehouse is located in the "A" District.

The outside surveillance cameras also observed defendant Elardo entering the warehouse on a daily basis to tend to the marijuana grow operation. In addition, officers obtained credit card information indicating that Elardo purchased equipment used to sustain an indoor, hydroponic marijuana grow operation. The equipment included a dehumidifier and filters.

At one point during the investigation, officers observed a police badge and credentials belonging to Melendez inside the warehouse. According to court documents, Melendez claimed to have previously lost the badge and identification.

On May 31, 2012, two additional locations were found to contain grow operations. A warehouse located at 1372 Clinton Street in Buffalo and a residence located at 76 West Woodside, both owned by Jason and Gale Elardo, were found to contain a marijuana grow operation. The residence also was found to contain marijuana packaged for sale and two firearms.

All four defendants were arraigned this afternoon. They due back in court on August 6, 2012 at 10 a.m. Gale Elardo is schedule to return to court on June 28, 2012 to appear with an attorney.

The Indictment is the culmination of an investigation on the part of Investigators of the New York State Police, under the direction of Major Christopher Cummings, the Drug Enforcement Administration, under the direction of Wilbert L. Plummer, Acting Special Agent in Charge, New York Field Division, Special Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Christopher M. Piehota, and the Buffalo Police Department under the direction of Commission Daniel Derenda.

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.

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