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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 6, 2013

MHIT “Blitz” Patrols Prove Successful

Board Members Announce Enhanced Resources

WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA — Wheeling Police Chief Shawn Schwertfeger, Ohio County Sheriff Patrick Butler, and Captain James Merrill of the West Virginia State Police today announced the results of an enhanced operation by the Mountaineer Highway Interdiction Team (MHIT) that occurred over the past week in the Wheeling area.

Leaders of the MHIT agencies explained that an “MHIT Blitz” took place between May 2 and May 5 with increased patrols on secondary roads throughout the area. Neighborhoods in East Wheeling, North Wheeling, and Center Wheeling received extra attention as part of the project, known as “Operation Mayflower.”

Chief Schwertfeger explained that as a result of the effort, 4 felony charges and 18 misdemeanor charges were filed, and 64 citations were issued. There were also 3 arrests for “Driving Under the Influence.” Drugs with a street value of over \$1,000 were recovered, and two active felony warrants were served. The substances recovered included prescription pills and marijuana.

“When our citizens bring issues to our attention we listen and increase our presence,” said Chief Schwertfeger. “This past weekend was a great example of that, and we’ll continue to do these types of operations in the future.”

“I learn a lot about our county by attending many of the community and crime watch meetings that are held each month,” stated Sheriff Butler. “The individuals who come to these meetings oftentimes provide us with actionable intelligence, and I appreciate that type of input.”

Wheeling resident Michael Anthony Kobasko, II, was one of those arrested, and it is alleged that he possessed approximately 125 Alprazolam pills on Friday, May 3, with the intent to deliver. He is facing a felony charge of “Possession with Intent to Deliver a Schedule IV Controlled Substance” in state court. The trade name for Alprazolam is Xanax.

In addition to the stops made over the weekend, MHIT was recently involved in the interdiction of six ounces of crack cocaine on Interstate 70 in a case that led to the federal indictment of an Ohio man - John Allen, III - for “Possession with Intent to Distribute.”

The leaders of MHIT also explained that the resources available to the team have increased since the beginning of the year, announcing that there are now five full-time officers plus two K-9s dedicated to the unit. The agencies involved have been very pleased with the team approach to interdiction and thus have increased their investment into the concept.

“MHIT not only increases our presence on local roadways but it also provides a partner for our drug task forces,” said Captain Merrill. “When a drug task force learns of a large supply of drugs that is coming into the area then a call can be made to MHIT to aid in the interception of those drugs.”

Through the end of March of 2013, MHIT officers had filed 244 felony charges, 557 misdemeanor charges, and had issued 205 misdemeanor citations. Over 1,000 searches have been conducted, including 127 by the K9 unit. Marijuana worth over a quarter of a million dollars has been seized, and heroin, cocaine, and pills worth over \$100,000 have been seized by the unit. A total of 14 stolen vehicles worth \$145,000 have been recovered, and United States currency in excess of \$75,000 has been seized.

MHIT became a part of the Northern West Virginia High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) program in 2012 and works with drug task forces in all four Northern Panhandle counties.

MHIT’s primary purpose is to enhance regional interdiction operations in order to slow the flow of illegal drugs into and through the State of West Virginia. The major focus of MHIT is on highways and state routes but it also concentrates on airports, bus terminals, hotels, motels and parcel and package interdiction.

Besides enhancing regional highway interdiction operations, MHIT has the added benefit of disrupting criminal organizations operating within West Virginia and of preserving citizen safety on West Virginia Highways through effective traffic and commercial vehicle enforcement. MHIT also assists in investigating kidnappings, bank robberies, carjackings, Amber Alerts and interstate theft; the detection and enforcement of firearms and explosives; human trafficking and immigration violations; and fugitive apprehension.

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