



U.S. Department of Justice

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
October 22, 2008

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MAUMELLE POLICE DEPARTMENT AND ARKANSAS NATIONAL GUARD RECEIVE FEDERAL ASSET FORFEITURE CHECKS

Little Rock – Jane W. Duke, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Arkansas, and William J. Bryant, Assistant Special Agent in Charge, Little Rock District Office of the Drug Enforcement Administration presented two asset forfeiture checks today. A check for \$11,563.79 was presented to Adjutant General William J. Johnson of the Arkansas National Guard and a check for \$115,637.93 was presented to Chief Sam Williams of the Maumelle Police Department. The checks are funded from assets forfeited in a civil forfeiture proceeding.

The civil forfeiture proceeding was part of a drug and money laundering case which began in Maumelle, Arkansas. On March 14, 2007, a concerned citizen contacted the Maumelle Police Department to report that an ambulance was broken down at a Shell gas station located in Maumelle. The citizen noted that there were three suspicious white males who appeared disheveled with what he thought to be gang tattoos around the ambulance.

Maumelle officers responded to the call at the gas station. They determined that the ambulance was licensed in Texas and that the registration was expired. After obtaining consent to search the ambulance, three large duffel bags containing marijuana and five boxes containing bricks of marijuana were found in various locations in the vehicle. The gross weight of the marijuana was approximately 385 pounds. Maumelle officers arrested the three men and they were taken into custody.

Further investigation by the Drug Enforcement Administration revealed that William Vito Lavenia of Fort Lauderdale, Florida had recruited John Henry Willhite, III, a resident of Texas, to transport marijuana by ambulance. Willhite was a registered EMT/paramedic and part owner of Bayou City EMS in Houston, Texas. Willhite had made a successful "test run" delivering marijuana for Lavenia in February 2007. Lavenia provided Willhite two individuals,

Robert James Abreu and Anthony Isaac Aviles, both of Florida, to assist with the March run from Los Angeles, California to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. During this run, the ambulance experienced mechanical difficulties and they stopped at the Shell station.

Federal arrest warrants for Willhite, Abreu and Aviles were issued in Little Rock by United States Magistrate Judge Tom Ray on March 15, 2007. Federal agents in Florida arrested Lavenia the same day. A criminal complaint was filed against Lavenia in U.S. District Court in Fort Lauderdale on March 16, 2007. An additional participant in the drug conspiracy, Jose Antonio Hernandez, was later indicted on a superceding indictment filed in the Southern District of Florida. A Verified Complaint of Forfeiture was filed in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Arkansas on May 16, 2007, against the proceeds from the sale of a property that was owned jointly by Lavenia and his wife. On October 1, 2008, a judgment was entered in that action forfeiting to the United States \$231,463.36, which represents ½ of the proceeds of the sale of the property – Lavenia's interest in the property.

The forfeited amount is being distributed to the Maumelle Police Department (\$115,563.79), the Arkansas National Guard Counter Drug Program(\$11,563.79), and the Fort Lauderdale Police Department (\$57,818.96), with the remainder of the funds going to the Department of Justice Asset Forfeiture Fund.

Willhite, Abreu, Aviles and Lavenia have entered pleas of guilty to conspiracy to distribute more than 100 kilograms of marijuana. Abreu was sentenced to time served on July 25, 2008. Willhite and Aviles await sentencing on November 7, 2008. Lavenia was sentenced to 37 months in federal prison with 3 years of supervised release and a \$15,000 fine. Hernandez pled guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud, conspiracy to commit money laundering related to wire and bank fraud, and conspiracy to commit money laundering related to narcotics trafficking as well as conspiracy to possess the marijuana confiscated in this case with the intent to distribute. He was sentenced to 151 months in federal prison with 5 years supervised release and was ordered to pay restitution of \$147,330.

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