



# Department of Justice

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## **JUSTICE DEPARTMENT'S CRIMINAL DIVISION CREATES APPALACHIAN REGIONAL PRESCRIPTION OPIOID STRIKE FORCE TO FOCUS ON ILLEGAL OPIOID PRESCRIPTIONS**

**LEXINGTON, Ky.** - Assistant Attorney General Brian A. Benczkowski of the Justice Department's Criminal Division today announced the formation of the Appalachian Regional Prescription Opioid Strike Force (ARPO Strike Force), a joint law enforcement effort that brings together the resources and expertise of the Health Care Fraud Unit in the Criminal Division's Fraud Section (HCF Unit), the U.S. Attorney's Offices for nine federal districts in five states, as well as law enforcement partners at the FBI, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of the Inspector General (HHS-OIG) and U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The mission of the ARPO Strike Force is to identify and investigate health care fraud schemes in the Appalachian region and surrounding areas, and to effectively and efficiently prosecute medical professionals and others involved in the illegal prescription and distribution of opioids.

Assistant Attorney General Benczkowski was joined in the announcement by U.S. Attorney Robert M. Duncan Jr. for the Eastern District of Kentucky; U.S. Attorney Russell M. Coleman for the Western District of Kentucky; U.S. Attorney Benjamin C. Glassman for the Southern District of Ohio; U.S. Attorney William J. Powell for the Northern District of West Virginia; U.S. Attorney Michael B. Stuart for the Southern District of West Virginia; U.S. Attorney J. Douglas Overbey for the Eastern District of Tennessee; U.S. Attorney Donald Q. Cochran for the Middle District of Tennessee; U.S. Attorney D. Michael Dunavant for the Western District of Tennessee; U.S. Attorney Jay E. Town for the Northern District of Alabama; Assistant Director Robert Johnson of the FBI's Criminal Investigative Division; Deputy Inspector General for Investigations Gary L. Cantrell of the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General (HHS-OIG) and Assistant Administrator John J. Martin of the DEA Diversion Control Division.

"While the opioid epidemic continues to inflict untold pain and suffering on people across the country, the devastation in the Appalachian region and adjacent areas has been particularly staggering," said Assistant Attorney General Benczkowski. "It is all the more reprehensible when unscrupulous physicians and pharmacies contribute to the epidemic by illegally supplying dangerous prescription painkillers. Working with our partners in U.S. Attorney's Offices and law enforcement, the Appalachian Regional Prescription Opioid Strike Force will combat illegal prescription opioids and health care fraud by holding accountable corrupt medical professionals who seek to profit off the crisis of opioid addiction."

“The creation of the Appalachian Regional Prescription Opioid Strike Force is consistent with the Department’s commitment to combat the opioid crisis with all available tools, said U.S. Attorney Robert M. Duncan, Jr., U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Kentucky. “The ARPO Strike Force prosecutors, working in partnership with Assistant United States Attorney’s in our Office and law enforcement officers in our District, will be focused on reducing access to opioids, including by investigating and prosecuting those medical professionals that unlawfully distribute opioids, putting greed over patient care and well being. We will remain diligent in the pursuit of this important mission.”

“The creation of the Appalachian Regional Prescription Opioid Strike Force will bring together critical resources from the FBI and our partners to fight health care fraud in this region and the growing opioid epidemic that faces the United States,” said FBI Assistant Director Johnson. “Healthcare fraud touches every corner of the United States, and through this strike force, the FBI will continue our tireless work to combat illegal opioid prescriptions and bring to justice those medical professionals who put their greed over the health and wellbeing of their patients.”

“The opioid epidemic has had a devastating impact on Americans across the country, including the people of the Appalachian region,” said HHS-OIG Deputy Inspector General for Investigations Cantrell. “The Strike Force model is a proven mechanism to target illicit conduct and hold accountable criminals involved in illegal opioid prescription and distribution schemes. We will continue to work closely with our federal, state, and local law enforcement partners to curb this damaging epidemic.”

“Our nation’s opioid crisis requires us to work with unprecedented urgency in attacking drug diversion at every level,” said DEA Assistant Administrator Martin. “These joint strike force efforts will save lives, while allowing us to better target and bring to justice those who facilitate addiction and profit at the expense of the weakest and most afflicted.”

Prior to this announcement, the HCF Unit operated Medicare Fraud Strike Force’s in 12 locations across the United States including Miami, Florida; Los Angeles, California; Detroit, Michigan; Houston, Texas; Brooklyn, New York; Baton Rouge and New Orleans, Louisiana; Tampa/Orlando, Florida; Chicago, Illinois; and Dallas, Texas, along with a Corporate Strike Force located in Washington, D.C., and the Newark/Philadelphia Regional Medicare Fraud Strike Force. The Strike Forces represent a partnership between the Criminal Division, U.S. Attorney’s Offices, the FBI, HHS-OIG and the DEA.

The ARPO Strike Force will be made up of prosecutors and data analysts with the HCF Unit, prosecutors with the nine U.S. Attorney’s Offices in the region, and special agents with the FBI, HHS-OIG and DEA. The ARPO Strike Force will operate out of two hubs based in the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky, and Nashville, Tennessee, areas, supporting the nine districts that make up the ARPO Strike Force region. In addition, the APRO Strike Force will work closely with other various federal law enforcement agencies, including the U.S. Postal Inspection Service and IRS Criminal Investigation, and State Medicaid Fraud Control Units.

The ARPO Strike Force will target criminal conduct associated with the improper prescription and distribution of prescription opioids and other dangerous narcotics throughout the Appalachian region and surrounding areas – focusing on criminal conduct by physicians, pharmacists, and other medical professionals. The ARPO Strike Force will also investigate and prosecute violations of health care fraud whenever such fraud is detected throughout the region.

In June, Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Alex M. Azar III noted the success of the Strike Force model while announcing the largest ever health care fraud enforcement action involving 601 charged defendants across 58 federal districts, including 165 doctors, nurses and other licensed medical professionals, for their alleged participation in health care fraud schemes involving more than \$2 billion in false billings. Of those charged, 162 defendants, including 76 doctors, were charged for their roles in prescribing and distributing opioids and other dangerous narcotics. More information can be obtained at <https://www.justice.gov/opa/documents-and-resources-june-28-2018>.

In August, Assistant Attorney General Benczkowski announced the Newark/Philadelphia Medicare Fraud Strike Force, which focuses on health care fraud and illegal opioid prescriptions in the Newark/Philadelphia region.

The Strike Force operations are part of a joint initiative between the Department of Justice and HHS to focus their efforts to prevent and deter fraud and enforce current anti-fraud laws around the country. Since its inception in March 2007, the prosecutors in the 12 Medicare Fraud Strike Force locations have charged over 4,000 defendants who collectively have falsely billed the Medicare program for over \$14 billion. Since January 2017, the HCF Unit has charged over 85 defendants, including 33 doctors with the illegal prescription of opioids (nearly 30 million pills).

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