

Department of Justice

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Western District of New York

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**BUFFALO POLICE OFFICER, CO-CONSPIRATOR ARRESTED; CHARGED
WITH OPERATING A LARGE SCALE
MARIJUANA GROW OPERATION**

BUFFALO, N.Y.-- U.S. Attorney William J. Hochul, Jr. announced today that Jorge Melendez, 41, and Jason Elardo, 42, both of Buffalo, N.Y., were arrested and charged by Criminal Complaint with conspiracy to manufacture more than 100 marijuana plants, maintaining a premises for manufacturing marijuana, and manufacturing more than 100 marijuana plants. The charges carry a mandatory minimum sentence of five years in prison, a maximum of 40 years, a fine of \$4,000,000 or both.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Melissa M. Marangola, who is handling the case, stated that according to the Criminal Complaint, Melendez, a Buffalo Police Officer, owns a warehouse at 2157 South Park Avenue 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 warehouse where a grow operation was located. According to the Complaint, 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 Complaint, 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 the Complaint, Melendez claimed to have previously lost the badge and identification.

"Police officers are sworn to protect the public and uphold the law," said U.S. Attorney Hochul. "It is particularly disturbing when an officer breaks the law he has sworn to uphold. This defendant chose to not only commit a crime, he did so, at times, in uniform and when he was supposed to be patrolling the streets of the city, protecting its citizens. Our Office will not only act to stop illegal narcotics trafficking, we will not tolerate public corruption of any kind."

The Criminal Complaint 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.