



U.S. Attorney's Report to the District

Shortly after taking office as U.S. Attorney in May 2010, I visited with federal, state and local law enforcement leaders to hear directly from them what they identified as the most pressing crime issues facing Connecticut. In the course of those discussions, I learned about the rising problem of prescription drug abuse.

The numbers are staggering. It is estimated that seven million Americans regularly abuse prescription drugs, including one in seven teenagers. Although often perceived as safer than street drugs, the illegal use of prescription drugs can be just as dangerous and addictive. Nationally, prescription drugs now cause more overdose deaths each year – nearly 40,000 – than cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine combined. Here in New England, prescription drug abuse is second only to heroin abuse in causing overdose deaths, and it is coming close to overtaking even that.

The problem affects all walks of life and cuts across all social classes. It affects our suburbs and rural areas, as well as our cities. It afflicts teenagers, as well as adults. One of the reasons prescription drug trafficking has become so prevalent is that it is a very profitable illegal enterprise. Pills that may cost a few dollars at a pharmacy can be resold on the street for \$30 or \$40.

As a result, I have made fighting prescription drug trafficking a priority program for our Office. As part of our effort, we have partnered with federal, state and local agencies, including the Drug Enforcement Administration, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services – Office of Inspector General, Connecticut State Police, the Connecticut Department of Consumer Protection's Drug Control Division and several local police departments. We have lowered the thresholds at which we accept cases for prosecution and have dedicated significant resources to this effort, including prosecutors who are experienced in health care fraud and cocaine and heroin trafficking cases. And we are committed to investigating every aspect of the illegal supply chain.

In the last 12 months, we have made great progress, charging more than 50 defendants with prescription pill related offenses, including large-scale traffickers, local dealers, users, pharmacy technicians, licensed and unlicensed doctors, doctor's office employees, state and county police officers, and Transportation Security Administration officers.

In April, I announced the results of the District's first wiretap investigation into the illicit trafficking of prescription narcotics. As part of Operation Big Blue, 16 defendants were charged in a conspiracy to distribute oxycodone, a potent and highly-addictive prescription narcotic, in New Haven County.

In September, I announced Operation Blue Coast, a long-term investigation that resulted in the arrests of 18 individuals, including three TSA officers and two law enforcement officers, who were charged for their alleged involvement in a conspiracy to distribute oxycodone. It is alleged that over the course of several months, 6,000 to 8,000 pills were transported from Florida to Connecticut approximately three times a week.

In October, we announced "Operation Pharm Team," a joint law-enforcement and regulatory agency initiative. As a result of this ongoing effort, approximately 10 individuals, including five pharmacy technicians and two doctor's office employees, have been charged with federal offenses stemming from the improper distribution of prescription medication.

Several of our cases have revealed an illegal prescription drug trafficking pipeline originating in Florida. Until recently, pain clinics, or "pill mills," thrived in Florida, and doctors in that state had been responsible for almost 90% of the oxycodone sold nationwide. Until recently, Florida had no prescription drug monitoring program, essentially a tracking system on doctors and patients' prescription practices. A majority of states, including Connecticut, have long had such a program, and it is an effective deterrent and early warning system. Through our investigative efforts, we have been able to develop a wealth of intelligence about the problem of pill trafficking stemming from Florida and are working closely – and sharing information – with law enforcement authorities there.

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We are also committed to outreach on this subject, educating parents and teenagers, educators and students, doctors, nurses, pharmacists and others to the dangers associated with prescription drug abuse, and the federal criminal and civil penalties associated with the illegal diversion and distribution of these drugs. For instance, we have seen that many young people who are addicted to prescription pain medication, which is essentially synthetic heroin, frequently turn to heroin to feed their habit because street heroin is a cheaper option.

The illegal distribution of prescription drugs is a significant problem, and we and our law enforcement partners are focusing our efforts to prevent it from getting worse. Those involved in the illegal distribution of prescription drugs should know that they will be investigated and prosecuted, like other drug dealers.