

Dozens indicted in ongoing drug battle

Attorney General hopes 'Operation Buyers' Remorse' serves as 'a wake-up call'

More arrests were made following a two-year federal investigation of a drug trafficking ring within the county.

Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine announced Thursday that more than three dozen people are now facing charges as a result of a large-scale investigation focusing on the trafficking and possession of drugs in Marion.

Thirty-nine people were indicted on a total of 125 felony and misdemeanor charges last week. The indictments, which were unsealed today, primarily surround the sale and possession of heroin, cocaine and prescription drugs. The charges follow the February indictments of 19 others who are facing federal charges in connection with the investigation.

The METRICH-MARMET Drug Task Force, FBI and BCI agents, members of the Marion Police Department, Marion County Sheriff's Office, Ohio Highway Patrol and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration assisted in serving arrest warrants on the suspects, beginning at 7 a.m. as part of "Operation Buyers' Remorse."

"Today's indictments and arrests focus on the mid-level traffickers and the addicts who are fueling the demand for drugs being brought into Marion County," DeWine said.

"While we know we cannot arrest our way out of the drug abuse problem, those who break the law must face the consequences. It is our hope that those arrested today will use this as a wake-up call to turn their lives around."

Local, state and federal agencies began investigating the suspects after an influx of drugs started coming into the community from Detroit and Fort Wayne, Ind.

The investigation involved electronic surveillance, which assisted in the federal and state indictments.

Marion police Chief Bill Collins noted this was the third time in the last eight weeks that a press conference had been held at City Hall to announce a large drug bust.

"The message I sent out then is the same one I send out today: If you're going to sell drugs, don't come to Marion, because we'll eventually get you," he said. "I think we've

shown in February and March and now in to April, this trend is going to continue. We're going to continue the battle that we've waged. We've arrested over 100 people between January and now, and it's not going to stop."

Marion County Prosecutor Brent Yager reaffirmed Collins' message to dealers who were "slinging poison in our community."

"We will find you, we will arrest you and we will prosecute you," he said. "As long as it takes, we will do this. And we will never quit."

Sheriff Tim Bailey said these arrests go beyond the drug issue.

"These people cannot financially support their drug habits on a daily basis," he said. "They go out to the local businesses and shoplift. They break into homes and break into cars. Thus, the community as a whole become victims."

Steven Dettelbach, U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Ohio, said the collaboration between all agencies has been "a model of teamwork."

Suspects indicted

Speakers addressed the crowd next to two large signs.

One detailed 14 suspected drug houses in Marion that were a part of the operation. The second showed the faces of 42 suspects sought in today's operation.

One of the faces on the board came as a shock to Mayor Scott Schertzer: a former student he had when he was an Elgin Local Schools teacher.

"She was a stellar young athlete in high school, and she was an outstanding student when I had her out at Elgin," he said. "Good kid, good family, good grades. How did they get to this point?"

In total, more than 30 people had been arrested Thursday.

Charges for possessing or trafficking heroin, cocaine and prescription pills, including Vicodin, Percocet, oxycodone and Xanax, were issued to 42 of the suspects.

Two were charged with other felony crimes believed to be related with drug trafficking, including obstructing justice and tampering with evidence. Conspiracy charges were issued to 12 suspects.

“Our hope is to get them in the system and maybe save their life,” said Maj. Jay McDonald with the Marion Police Department. “We’re not looking for these people to be locked away for the rest of their life. Hopefully, we can get them into the system and maybe, through those resources that the system provides, they can have a chance to get out of this circle.”

Those sought are believed to be connected with the 19 indicted on federal felony charges Feb. 19.

“A few weeks back, we were rounding up the drug dealers,” McDonald said. “Today (Thursday), we’re rounding up the people that they sold drugs to.”

In February, a 72-count indictment was unsealed involving suspects from Marion and Detroit. Investigators believe they brought heroin, crack cocaine and prescription drugs from Michigan and Indiana into Marion. According to Dettelbach, the drug trafficking ring had sold illegal substances to “dozens of people, including juveniles.”

While those suspects are still involved in their cases at a federal court in Toledo, prosecutors with DeWine’s office will prosecute the more recent cases at the state level.

“We’ve been pretty loaded down with new felonies,” Yager said. “There’s no way we could process all of these without some help. It’s a really great tool.”

Town hall meeting addresses issues

The drug bust was a hot topic among speakers at a town hall meeting Thursday evening at Harding High School.

Members of the STAND Coalition had the event with the goal of discussing how the court system and local judges are addressing the drug epidemic.

DeWine said meetings like that are “what has to happen” to stop or slow down the issue.

“As good as these law enforcement men and women are, we can’t arrest our way out of the problem,” he said. “This is not only a supply problem; it’s a demand problem. We have people who want to buy this stuff.”

DeWine added it was a “three-pronged” issue that should be focused on law enforcement, treatment and education.

“The communities that start to turn it around have all three,” he said. “The real difference is that they have a very energized grass-roots effort to deal with education.”

Schertzer said it is not the city’s responsibility to deal with the rehabilitation aspects, but he said he does support rehabilitating drug addicts.

He said he has asked some of the area churches to get involved at local rehabilitation facilities.

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