Two Wooster people charged in METRICH drug raid, deputies' exposure to fentanyl explained

Authorities charged two Wooster people on Tuesday involved in a METRICH drug raid on Sunday that ultimately led to the hospitalization of two county sheriff deputies after their exposure to what authorities suspect was fentanyl.

Kimberly Sutton, 38, and Brandon Price, 41, were charged with having weapons under disability, a third-degree felony.

The charges stem from a Sunday search from a structure on the 1400 block of County Road 1575, Ashland police said in a news release issued Wednesday.

Police seized 27 grams of suspected methamphetamine, 20 grams of “fentanyl/heroin,” two handguns and $914 in cash.

Ashland police said the case has been forwarded to the Ashland County Prosecutor’s office for potential further charges, “pending lab results from the Mansfield Crime Lab.”

Assistant prosecutor Victor Perez declined to comment on whether the office expects to file additional charges.

Ashland attorney Matt Malone, who represents Sutton, said he expects additional charges to come. He said the prosecutor’s office typically files a charge that can survive a preliminary hearing.

“When the indictment is issued, that’s when the rest of the charges will come,” he said. “If (Sutton) had fentanyl on her person, she could be charged with illegal conveyance into a detention facility or aggravated possession of drugs. I don’t know that to be true or not.”

Malone declined to offer additional details about his client’s case.

Price’s attorney Donald Wick, based in Mt. Gilead, was not immediately available for comment.

Incidental exposure to fentanyl

On Monday, the Ashland County Sheriff's Office issued a news release that stated two deputies were exposed to suspected fentanyl they found in Sutton's bra when dropped off at the county jail.

Ashland police notified the deputies of Sutton's suspected possession of "fentanyl and other drugs" ahead of dropping her off at the jail, according to a news release issued by the sheriff's office.

So "the jail staff prepared themselves with gloves and masks."

"During the search, a baggie of white substance was found in (the suspect's) bra. As deputies pulled the bag out, it tore open," the news release read.

The deputies, whom jail staff declined to identify, were given doses of Narcan, a drug used to reverse the effects of opioid overdoses. They were released from the hospital later that day.

Sutton was also transported to the hospital, though she did not show signs of being affected by the drug and was returned to jail.

Ashland Police Chief Dave Lay said the reason suspected fentanyl made it inside the jail was because the two officers who arrested Sutton are males who "knew the narcotic was on the person of the arrestee in a location they didn't want to go after."

"They thought it would be more appropriate for a female jailer to do it," Lay said.

There is disagreement between law enforcement agencies and the medical community on whether or not exposure to fentanyl through the eyes or skin, or by inhalation, can cause overdoses.

The federal Drug Enforcement Agency issued a warning in 2016 to law enforcement officials across the nation that said "fentanyl can be absorbed through the skin or accidental inhalation of airborne powder can also occur … Just touching fentanyl or accidentally inhaling the substance during enforcement activity or field testing the substance can result in absorption through the skin."

The DEA's warning went to say symptoms such as disorientation, coughing, sedation, respiratory distress or cardiac arrest can happen "within minutes of exposure."

A year later, the Department of Justice issued a similar warning.

However, the American College of Medical Toxicology and American Academy of Clinical Toxicology said in an article published in September 2017 that “significant exposure to emergency responders is extremely low” because “incidental (skin) absorption is unlikely to cause opioid toxicity.”

The ACMT article said people can be exposed to fentanyl through the skin, inhalation or eyes. But an unprotected person would need to be exposed to fentanyl’s highest airborne concentration for nearly 200 minutes to reach toxicity.

Further, “incidental dermal absorption is unlikely to cause opioid toxicity,” the authors of the article said. If the exposure comes through the eyes, the authors said washing them thoroughly would prevent toxic exposure.

Others from the medical community have warned that a misrepresentation of fentanyl's dangers to law enforcement could "aggravate already elevated burdens of officer stress and burnout, while chilling lifesaving overdose response," according to authors of another study.

Lay acknowledged the contradiction, and said “chemical substances need a mucus membrane to be absorbed by the body. So if you’re sweaty, or you have it on your hands and stays there when the skin absorbs it later, there are ways it can happen.”

The sheriff's news release said the deputies "started having overdose reactions to the white powder."

How the deputies were exposed to the suspected fentanyl, whether through the skin, eyes or inhalation, remains unclear.

Ashland County Sheriff Chief Deputy David Blake was not immediately available to comment.

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