



For Immediate Release

Trooper Task Force Arrests Eight on Illegal Drug Charges

Western Alaska Alcohol and Narcotics Team lead a large-scale investigation into the sale and distribution of heroin and methamphetamine in Nome.

November 3, 2020 (Anchorage, Alaska) – A multi-agency task force led by the Alaska State Troopers Statewide Drug Enforcement Unit's (SDEU) Western Alaska Alcohol and Narcotics Team (WAANT) performed a successful drug enforcement operation during the week of October 27th in Nome, Alaska. Law enforcement professionals from the Alaska State Troopers, Bethel Police Department, Nome Police Department, and the FBI Safe Streets Task Force served several search warrants in the Nome area which resulted in multiple arrests and seizures related to illegal drug trafficking in the area.

"This operation exemplifies the commitment of Alaska's law enforcement to keeping illegal narcotics off of our streets and holding those that traffic drugs in our state accountable," said **Captain Andrew Gorn, Commander of the Alaska Bureau of Investigation**. "Alaska State Trooper's Statewide Drug Enforcement Unit along with our partners will continue to work diligently to dismantle illegal drug operations across both urban and rural Alaska."

"This operation was a major disruption to the illegal narcotics supply in Nome and the surrounding villages, which is critical to the FBI's mission in Alaska," said **Robert Britt, Special Agent in Charge of the FBI Anchorage Field Office**. "The FBI Safe Streets Task Force works tirelessly with our local partners, and in support of AST's Statewide Drug Enforcement Unit, to keep Alaskans safe from those who have no regard for the devastation and lasting impacts drugs can have on our communities and its families."

During the course of the operation investigators seized approximately 7 grams of heroin (approximately 70 doses) packaged for individual sale; the heroin seized is worth an approximate street value of \$7,000. Along with the heroin, approximately \$4,300.00 in cash, drug distribution, and drug use paraphernalia was also seized.

Due to inspection of commercial air cargo and enforcement efforts, illegal drugs tend to have a much higher street value in rural Alaska communities and villages than in urban Alaska and the lower 48. For example, one gram of heroin may sell for between \$125-\$140 in Anchorage, but in Nome it can sell for \$1,000 and \$1,200.

In total, eight individuals were arrested and charged as a result of the investigations and operation:

- Felicia Larsen, age 25 of Nome, was charged with seven counts of Misconduct Involving a Controlled Substance (MICS) in the Second Degree.

- Paul Benchoff Jr, age 34 of Nome, was charged with three counts of MICS in the Second Degree and one count of MICS in the Third Degree.
- Yvonne Aukon, age 31 of Wasilla, was charged with two counts of MICS in the Second Degree.
- Joel Orazio, age 53 of Anchorage, was charged with two counts of MICS in the Second Degree.
- Ida Booshu, age 40 of Nome, was charged with two counts of MICS in the second degree.
- Daniel Atkinson, age 59 of Nome, was charged with three counts of MICS in the Third Degree.
- Michael McGowan Jr., age 28 of Nome, was charged with one count of MICS in the Third Degree.
- Joan Miller, age 34 of Nome, was charged with one count of MICS in the Second Degree.

Any charges reported in this press release are merely accusations and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

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