

Meth ring probe indicts 70

By Carol Bryant

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More than 70 people have been indicted for their links to a Grand Island-based methamphetamine ring.

The 21/2 year investigation, dubbed "Operation Powerball," tracked up to \$3 million worth of the illegal drug, said FBI Special Agent David Burlew of Grand Island. The majority of people were indicted out of the Grand Island area.

Although officers and prosecutors agreed to talk about Operation Powerball, they said the investigation continues, and at least 10 who were indicted in connection with the drug ring are still fugitives.

"Powerball was a very large conspiracy," said U.S. Attorney Tom Monaghan. "There were other drugs involved, (but) this is primarily a methamphetamine conspiracy."

Most of the illegal drugs came from Mexico, arrived in Grand Island, and were distributed throughout Nebraska.

The Tri-City Federal Drug Task Force, the Lincoln Drug Task Force and several other law enforcement agencies have been investigating the drug ring.

"This is a joint effort from a lot of agencies -- state, local and federal agencies working together," said Monaghan, chief federal prosecutor for Nebraska.

"The main source for the drugs was Grand Island," he said. "From Grand Island, it radiated out, mostly to Lincoln, some to Omaha, some to smaller communities. The people in Lincoln who got the drugs went to Grand Island to get it."

Through Operation Powerball, 38 people have been indicted out of the Lincoln area on federal charges, and 11 were prosecuted on state charges, Monaghan said.

"There were some in Omaha, too," he said, but he did not have a specific number.

From the Grand Island area, at least 36 people have been arrested on federal drug charges, according to an FBI list, and others have been indicted but not captured. The indictments began in October 1996.

In York area, investigation of the drug ring led to identifying people contributing to the April 1996 death of 17-year-old Kory Sierp of York, the federal prosecutor said. Sierp collapsed at his prom and later died from heart failure caused by methamphetamine abuse.

"As a result of this investigation, we found those responsible for his death," Monaghan said.

The organized-crime drug-enforcement task force investigating the group has accounted for 183.5 pounds of meth that had been distributed. Officers have seized or purchased an additional 13 pounds of meth, Burlew said.

From October 1995 to May 1998, Operation Powerball accounted for 196.5 pounds of meth being distributed through Grand Island. A pound of methamphetamine sells for \$8,000 to \$16,000, Burlew said, making the 196.5 pounds worth \$1.6 million to \$3.1 million.

The investigation located people in seven states -- Nebraska, South Dakota, Iowa, Kansas, Arizona, California and Nevada -- involved in the drug ring, Burlew said.

Although investigators declined to name a single leader for the meth distribution network, court records show seven Operation Powerball suspects originally sentenced to at least 10 years in prison:

* Juan Esparza-Ramirez of Omaha -- 17 years, six months in prison.

* Sylvia Sanchez of Grand Island -- 15 years, eight months in prison, later reduced to five years in prison for her cooperation.

* Juan Rodriguez of Grand Island -- 14 years in prison.

* Candelario Rodriguez of Grand Island -- 13 years in prison.

* Angel Minjarez-Torres of Grand Island -- 10 years in prison.

* Filiberto Gurrola Garcia of Grand Island -- 10 years, one month in prison.

* Isidro Perez-Coronel of Lincoln -- 10 years, one month in prison

U.S. District Judge Richard Kopf of Lincoln found that Esparza-Ramirez was responsible for 22 to 66 pounds in the conspiracy, Monaghan said.

Authorities believe Esparza-Ramirez was carrying large quantities of the drug to Grand Island, Lincoln, Omaha and Panama, Neb., for redistribution from late 1996 until summer 1997. His sentence was lengthened because of his role in the conspiracy and his possession of a gun when arrested.

Omaha police officers and Douglas County sheriff's deputies entered an Omaha apartment on July 18, 1997, looking for Esparza-Ramirez on a federal warrant. As officers entered, they saw him sitting at the kitchen table with a loaded 9 mm handgun on the floor next to him.

A police officer kicked a gun out of the hand of another person in the apartment, Monaghan said. About 1.5 pounds of methamphetamine and more than \$4,800 in cash were seized.

Sanchez was sentenced on June 17, 1997, but her sentence was reduced on July 28, 1998, because of her "substantial assistance in the investigation and prosecution of other drug traffickers," Monaghan said.

Sanchez received 10 to 30 kilograms of meth in 1995 and 1996 from Phoenix. She received the drugs in pound increments that were distributed primarily in the Lincoln area, Monaghan said.

She also was a "major methamphetamine distributor in the Grand Island/Hall County area," State Patrol Lt. Bill Schlachter said in June 1997. Schlachter is now retired.

Candelario Rodriguez was among six people arrested on Jan. 28, 1998, after the Tri-City Federal Drug Task Force made a controlled delivery of more than 1 pound of meth. After delivering the drugs, officers served a search warrant

at 1216 W. Third St. Items seized included \$7,990 cash, a stolen 9 mm handgun and a stolen 12-gauge shotgun.

Minjarez-Torres was found guilty of selling methamphetamine to at least seven people and was responsible for nearly 10 kilograms of the drug sold from a Grand Island apartment in 1995 and 1996.

He had been convicted and sentenced in 1993 to one year in prison for drug possession in Dawson County, Monaghan said in December 1997. Minjarez-Torres was deported following that conviction but re-entered the United States in 1996. He was then convicted and sentenced to one year in prison for illegal re-entry.

Gurrola Garcia twice sold methamphetamine when an undercover officer was involved. The officers bought 3 ounces of the drug from him on April 12, 1997. The second purchase, involving 4 ounces of methamphetamine, occurred on April 22, 1997, in Lexington.

Most of the methamphetamine tracked by Operation Powerball was coming to Grand Island from Mexico.

"Our investigation shows the methamphetamine is being smuggled across the border. Most of it is coming from Sinaloa, Mexico," Burlew said. Sinaloa is a state in western Mexico.

The drug is mainly smuggled across the border in California, Texas and Arizona and then driven to Nebraska, Burlew said.

"All the methamphetamine that we're seeing in Nebraska comes from Mexico directly or via California," Monaghan said.

Grand Island police officer Tony Keiper is the local case agent for the investigation through the Tri-City Federal Drug Task Force. The organized-crime drug-enforcement task force is federally funded. It provides overtime pay to help with costs of local investigators involved in the federal investigation.

Participating agencies include Grand Island, Hastings and Kearney police; Hall, Adams and Buffalo County sheriff's departments; Nebraska State Patrol; Internal Revenue Service; and FBI.

Michelle Oldham, a deputy Hall County attorney, is also a special assistant U.S. attorney assigned to prosecute the drug cases.

Twelve to 15 investigators are part of the task force, compared to four officers when investigators banded together in 1991, Burlew said.

"We've made great strides with resources to combat the drug problem here," Burlew said. The efforts are "the result of everyone working together in law enforcement."