



PRESS RELEASE

City of Pueblo Police Department

Operation Call Your Bluff



August 23, 2022 [FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE]

The United States Attorney's Office for the District of Colorado joined FBI Denver Division, Pueblo Police Department, and the 10th Judicial District Attorney's Office at a news conference to announce the results of a five-year investigation into violent gang activity in Pueblo, resulting in the convictions and sentencing of more than a dozen gang members and associates. Members of the enterprise engaged in narcotics trafficking and acts of violence, including murder and assault.

To date, there have been 13 defendants arrested and charged federally and 12 arrested and charged in the state. This has led to a significant reduction in violent crime in the Pueblo area. In 2016, Ace gang members were responsible for 16% of the murder, assault, narcotics possession/distribution, and weapons charges according to the Pueblo Police Department. In 2021, Ace gang members were responsible for less than 2.5% of those crimes.

"This operation took violent offenders off the streets and put them in prison for a long time. Some of the defendants were spreading highly addictive and deadly drugs to Pueblo's residents. This operation shows the dedication of the investigators with the FBI and the Pueblo Police Department and the determination of the U.S. Attorney's Office and the 10th Judicial District Attorney's Office to help make Pueblo a safer community," said U.S. Attorney Cole Finegan. "Our work does not end here. We will continue to hold gang members and drug dealers accountable if they break the law."

The defendants charged and convicted federally include:

- Emilio Hall, age 27, of Pueblo was sentenced to 32 years in prison after pleading guilty to Violent Crimes in Aid of Racketeering Activity (VICAR) murder. According to the plea agreement, on June 23, 2019, Hall shot and killed Floyd Robinson in the area of Bessemer Park in Pueblo as retaliation for a perceived offense against the Ace gang. Hall committed the murder in order to increase or maintain his standing in the Ace gang. U.S. District Court Judge Raymond P. Moore sentenced Hall on June 24, 2022. CASE NUMBER: 21-cr-00141.
- Christopher Ortiz, age 42, of Pueblo, was sentenced to 10 years in prison after pleading guilty to being an accessory after the fact. According to the plea agreement, Ortiz was an Ace gang member, and because of his relationship with Emilio Hall, Ortiz destroyed the firearm that Hall used to kill Floyd Robinson. He did this in order to hinder and prevent Hall's apprehension, trial or punishment for the crime of VICAR murder. U.S. District Court Judge Raymond P. Moore sentenced Ortiz on August 16, 2022. CASE NUMBER: 21-cr-00141.
- Jose Angel Martinez, age 30, was sentenced to 12 years in prison for his plea to possession with intent to distribute heroin and violation of the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO). According to the plea agreement, on August 5, 2019, law enforcement conducted an operation to arrest Martinez on a warrant related to a July 18, 2019, fight and assault at a Pueblo bar. The FBI was able to obtain a search warrant of his apartment and recovered seven firearms, approximately 3.5 pounds of heroin, approximately 6.8 ounces of cocaine,

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approximately 15 grams of crack cocaine, \$35,000, and several digital scales and a drug ledger. U.S. District Court Judge Raymond P. Moore sentenced Martinez on June 27, 2022. CASE NUMBER: 19-cr-00377.

- Leonard Rodriguez, age 30, of Pueblo, was sentenced to 80 months of imprisonment for possession with the intent to distribute 100 grams or more of heroin. The conviction was tied to a search warrant executed on September 4, 2019, where police discovered Rodriguez in possession of 507 grams of heroin, 112 grams of methamphetamine, a firearm, numerous rounds of firearm ammunition, items indicative of narcotics trafficking, and thousands of dollars in cash. U.S. District Court Judge Christine M. Arguello sentenced Rodriguez on April 11, 2022. CASE NUMBER: 19-cr-00430.

- James Anthony Lovato, age 37, was sentenced to 10 years in prison after being convicted of possession with intent to distribute over 50 grams of methamphetamine. Lovato was an associate of the Ace gang in Pueblo. According to the plea agreement, on May 21, 2019, detective from the Pueblo Police Department's Special Investigation Division received a tip from an anonymous source that the defendant possessed a large duffle bag containing pounds of methamphetamine and heroin. While taking Lovato into custody for an outstanding arrest warrant and executing a search warrant on his home, law enforcement discovered he was in possession of over 300 grams of methamphetamine, 40 grams of heroin, and thousands of dollars in cash. Lovato was sentenced by U.S. District Court Judge R. Brooke Jackson on August 5, 2022. CASE NUMBER: 19-cr-00314.

- Victor Adrian Trujillo, age 38, of Pueblo, was sentenced to 100 months in prison after pleading guilty to possession of ammunition by a prohibited person. According to the plea agreement, officers searched for Trujillo to execute a state arrest warrant for escape. Officers identified Trujillo in a vehicle and attempted a traffic stop. Trujillo eluded officers in the vehicle. Officers eventually contacted Trujillo and arrested him. Officers observed, in plain view, a black handgun on the front, driver's side floorboard between Trujillo's feet. Trujillo is a convicted felon and cannot possess firearms and ammunition. U.S. District Court Judge Daniel D. Domenico sentenced Trujillo on September 17, 2021. CASE NUMBER: 19-cr-380.

- Maximillian Esquibel, age 34, of Pueblo, was sentenced to 58 months after a jury convicted him of being a felon in possession of firearms. U.S. District Court Judge R. Brooke Jackson sentenced Esquibel on December 7, 2020. CASE NUMBER: 19-cr-376.

- Joseph Bachicha, age 38, of Pueblo, was sentenced to 42 months in prison after pleading guilty to possession with intent to distribute heroin. According to the plea agreement, on June 23, 2018, officers saw the defendant engage in hand-to-hand drug deal. At the time of his arrest, officers found approximately 49 grams of heroin in his possession. Judge R. Brooke Jackson sentenced Bachicha on February 14, 2019. CASE NUMBER: 18-cr-358

- Joshua Roy Wisthoff, age 36, of Pueblo, was sentenced to 66 months in prison after pleading guilty to possession of a firearm by a prohibited person and possession of a firearm in furtherance of a drug trafficking crime. According to the plea agreement, on January 2, 2021, Wisthoff was observed running a red light by a Pueblo Police officer. Another officer arrived on scene and observed a firearm in plain view on the passenger seat of Wisthoff's vehicle. The firearm was used by Wisthoff as protection when he sold methamphetamine. When the vehicle was searched, officers located a digital scale, an empty baggie in the center console, and a baggie containing methamphetamine located between the driver's seat and the center console, which Wisthoff intended to distribute. U.S. District Court Judge Raymond P. Moore sentenced Wisthoff on August 8, 2022. CASE NUMBER: 21-cr-092

- Isaac Chavez, age 39, of Pueblo, was sentenced to 72 months in prison after pleading guilty to possession with intent to distribute 50 grams and more of a mixture and substance containing a detectable amount of methamphetamine. According to the plea agreement, on August

30, 2019, officers encountered Chavez after he crashed on his motorcycle. He had two active arrest warrants and his driver's license was revoked. Officers found a significant amount of methamphetamine at the scene near his crashed motorcycle. Officers also found methamphetamine, heroin, and cocaine in a backpack he dumped while fleeing from officers on foot. U.S. District Court Judge Robert E. Blackburn sentenced Chavez on March 21, 2022. CASE NUMBER: 19-CR-426

In addition, there were several cases prosecuted by the state. They are being announced separately by the 10th Judicial District Attorney's Office.

"FBI Denver works with our federal, state and local partners across Colorado to keep communities safe. In Pueblo, we were able to leverage FBI resources to successfully target a violent, criminal gang," said FBI Denver Special Agent in Charge Michael Schneider. "We will continue to work with our partners in Pueblo and elsewhere, and we will continue to target violent drug dealers and those who support such operations."

Pueblo Police Chief Chris Noeller stated, "The work of the FBI, the US Attorney's Office, the 10th Judicial District Attorney's Office, our detectives and investigators in this operation took a large number of violent offenders off the streets of Pueblo and helped make our community safer. We are very thankful for the partnership we have with the FBI, the US Attorney's Office, and the 10th Judicial District Attorney's Office in this environment where violent crime is continuing to increase, not only here in Pueblo, but across the State."

The investigation in this case was conducted by the Pueblo Police Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Denver Division, and 10th Judicial District Attorney's Office, with assistance from the Pueblo County Sheriff's Office, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and the Colorado State Patrol. The prosecution was handled by Assistant United States Attorneys Dan McIntyre and Thomas Minser and the Violent Crime and Immigration Section of the U.S. Attorney's Office, with assistance from the Department of Justice's Organized Crime and Gang Section.

This prosecution is part of an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) investigation. OCDETF identifies, disrupts, and dismantles the highest-level drug traffickers, money launderers, gangs, and transnational criminal organizations that threaten the United States by using a prosecutor-led, intelligence-driven, multi-agency approach that leverages the strengths of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies against criminal networks.

It is also part of Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), a program bringing together all levels of law enforcement and the communities they serve to reduce violent crime and gun violence, and to make our neighborhoods safer for everyone. On May 26, 2021, the Department launched a violent crime reduction strategy strengthening PSN based on these core principles: fostering trust and legitimacy in our communities, supporting community-based organizations that help prevent violence from occurring in the first place, setting focused and strategic enforcement priorities, and measuring the results.

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