

DEA busts 'catastrophic' pill distribution operation in Cottonwood Heights

By Ben Lockhart, Deseret News | Posted Nov 22nd, 2016 @ 10:29pm

COTTONWOOD HEIGHTS — Federal agents discovered an enormous amount of illicit fentanyl pills at a Cottonwood Heights home Tuesday in what they called an "absolutely catastrophic" undercover drug dealing operation.



Police and DEA agents put on chemical suits as Local and federal agencies respond to a fentanyl drug bust in Cottonwood Heights on Tuesday, Nov. 22, 2016. (Scott G. Winterton, Deseret News)

It's likely that the total number of pills will number in the millions when they're counted up, said Brian Besser, Drug Enforcement Administration agent in charge in Utah. He said it is safe to assume Tuesday's raid, carried out in a home at 7939 S. Titian St. (3125 East), beginning 8 a.m., is the largest seizure of pills in the state's history.

Agents arrested Aaron Michael Shamo, 26, who lives at the home. Federal prosecutors filed a complaint against him alleging distribution of fentanyl with intent to distribute, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison and a \$1 million fine.

Agents discovered a "pill press" inside Shamo's home that is likely capable of manufacturing several thousand pills per hour, Besser said, adding that Shamo had carried out a manufacturing and distribution operation inside his home for at least a matter of months, though he wasn't sure if it was longer.

Fentanyl can be deadly to the touch to non-opioid users, Besser said. Because it was falsely packaged as black market oxycodone, which is far less potent, he said "it would be very safe to say people have died from this operation" due to overdoses.

The pills were distributed across the United States, at least partly through the mail, according to Besser. Agents were still investigating the breadth of the operation and hoped to arrest anyone found to be "aiding, abetting or assisting Shamo in any way," he said.

In the raid, DEA agents were assisted by local hazardous materials crews and the Utah National Guard because of the extremely dangerous materials they were seizing, Besser said. Because of that danger, he didn't know when authorities would be done searching the home.

"Every precaution is being taken for the safety of our officers," he said.

The Internal Revenue Service was also on scene, though reasons for their presence were not immediately clear.

Shamo's alleged distribution of fentanyl is "absolutely catastrophic" because it is impossible for most people to identify a fentanyl pill disguised as oxycodone, according to Besser.

"These synthetic opioids are extremely deadly," he said.

Distribution of the drug, Besser said, is intended to take advantage of pain killer addicts looking for oxycodone or other, less potent substances on the black market.

Fentanyl's effects also vary considerably, depending on whether the person exposed to it has developed a high threshold for painkillers.

"That is the problem with these fentanyl pills," Besser said. "The first person may take one and (nothing noticeable happens). The second person may take it and die almost immediately."

Federal court documents in Shamo's case specifically identify 95,000 pills. They state he also kept illicit pills at a "stash location" at 11469 S. Open View Lane (4800 West) in South Jordan.

Shamo "is known to have employed several individuals over the past year to accept shipments of packages from China at their residences," the federal complaint states.

"These individuals would deliver the packages to Shamo without opening them or inspecting the contents. Within the last few months, law enforcement agents were able to seize several of the packages that were shipped to these individuals," including one that had contents testing positive for 120 grams of fentanyl, the complaint states.

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