

U.S. Attorney Vaudreuil: 14th defendant sentenced in 127-pound Minnesota-to-Wisconsin methamphetamine conspiracy

Posted on Thursday, Mar 9, 2017

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Five Other Defendants Who Have Pleaded Guilty, Will be Sentenced in April & May

MADISON, WIS. — John W. Vaudreuil, United States Attorney for the Western District of Wisconsin, announced today the results of a three-year investigation by local, state, and federal law enforcement into the large scale trafficking of methamphetamine in central Wisconsin. To date, 19 people have pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court in Madison to conspiring to distribute methamphetamine. Of these 19 defendants, 14 have been sentenced, with the remaining five set to be sentenced in the next 60 days. The sentences imposed total 158 years in federal prison.

This conspiracy involved the trafficking of pure methamphetamine (also known as “Ice” or “crystal meth”). The methamphetamine came from the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. It was distributed by an organized network of drug wholesalers and retailers in central Wisconsin. The methamphetamine was sold in Wisconsin communities, both large and small, including Wausau, Merrill, Medford, Abbotsford, Owen, Athens, Eau Claire, and Osseo. The marketing plan of the organization was to flood these communities with inexpensive, pure, and plentiful methamphetamine, in an effort to create more addicts, and therefore more customers.

The conspiracy operated from June 2013 to May 2016. During this time, methamphetamine was brought into Wisconsin from Minnesota on a weekly basis, averaging one pound per week. Demand exploded in late 2015 and early 2016, and the trafficking increased to two to three pounds per week. In all, over 58 kilograms (or 127 pounds) of methamphetamine were distributed by the members of this conspiracy. The methamphetamine had a street value of over \$5.7 million dollars.

The 19 defendants charged included Joe Kujawa, the source of supply in Minneapolis, and David Vance-Bryan and Mike Kjonaas, Kujawa's drivers who transported the methamphetamine from Minnesota to Wisconsin. Also charged were Kyle Quintana, Anthony Rogers, Jacob Loose, Paul Rasmussen and Patrick Keenan —

Kujawa's main wholesalers in Wisconsin. Their customers, who were second-level distributors, were also charged — Karen Zais, Andy Nelson, Jaimie Pankow, Chris Schmeltzer, Matt Drake, Ryan Thomas, and Jonas Ellwart. Street-level distributors were also charged — Danny Graap, Josh Graap and Christina Abbott.

The following chart summarizes the key court dates and the sentences imposed in this investigation so far:

NAME	AGE	ADDRESS	INDICTMENT DATE	PLEA DATE	SENTENCING DATE	SENTENCE IMPOSED
1. Andy Nelson	32	Merrill	3-9-16	9-14-16	12-7-16	4.5 years
2. Karen Zais	49	Merrill	3-9-16	9-14-16	11-29-16	6 years
3. Anthony Rogers	24	Athens	3-30-16	8-23-16	3-7-17	13.5 years
4. Joe Kujawa	37	Oakdale, Minn.	5-11-16	11-16-16	3-3-17	18 years
5. Kyle Quintana	24	Wausau	5-11-16	11-15-16	3-6-17	13 years
6. Jacob Loose	25	Wausau	5-11-16	10-28-16	1-9-17	15 years
7. Pat Keenan	30	Wausau	5-11-16	11-29-16	3-8-17	15 years
8. Jamie Pankow	33	Wausau	5-11-16	11-3-16	2-10-17	7 years
9. Paul Rasmussen	35	Osseo	6-1-16	10-28-16	1-10-17	15 years
10. Chris Schmeltzer	46	Merrill	6-1-16	10-27-16	2-9-17	6 years
11. David Brandenburg	26	Merrill	7-13-16	12-1-16	2-24-17	9 years
12. Matt Drake	26	Merrill	7-13-16	11-22-16	2-8-17	12 years
13. Ryan Thomas	24	Wausau	8-3-16	11-10-16	2-9-17	12.5 years

14. Jonas Ellwart	24	Wausau	8-3-16	1-25-17	4-12-17	
15. Danny Graap	50	Merrill	8-24-16	2-3-17	4-24-17	
16. Josh Graap	32	Merrill	8-24-16	1-31-17	4-12-17	
17. Christina Abbott	34	Merrill	8-24-16	2-21-17	5-10-17	
18. David Vance-Bryan	30	St. Paul, Minn.	9-14-16	11-17-16	2-16-17	11.5 years
19. Mike Kjonaas	41	St. Paul	9-14-16	2-10-16	4-27-17	

This was the second federal felony drug conviction for methamphetamine distribution for Joe Kujawa, Paul Rasmussen, and Chris Schmeltzer.

All 19 defendants pleaded guilty to the conspiracy charge and were sentenced before U.S. District Judge James D. Peterson in Madison. At the respective sentencing hearings, Judge Peterson repeated some common themes.

First, even though all of the defendants were drug addicts, Judge Peterson noted that their addictions did not “alleviate them from responsibility” for their crimes. The Judge explained that methamphetamine addiction did not take away their ability to choose to become drug dealers, and they all chose to become high-level wholesalers and dealers of large amounts of methamphetamine for profit.

Second, Judge Peterson stressed that the sentences were designed, in part, to send a message to the communities impacted by this crime. Judge Peterson explicitly stated that these defendants “did a horrible thing” and “inflicted serious damage” on these communities; that it was “nothing short of a plague that took advantage of people who were addicts;” and that these defendants “took advantage of other people’s diseases” to make a profit. Judge Peterson said that his sentences were intended to reflect “the sense of outrage and condemnation” for the harm caused to the affected communities.

In sentencing Jacob Loose on January 9, Judge Peterson commented that Loose was a “dangerous person who is capable of violence and I don’t see this getting better.” The Judge added, “This is a crime with a very, very dangerous drug. You are a different category of offender. You dealt vast quantities that were spread over a large part of Wisconsin. You played a significant role in a big deal drug conspiracy.”

In sentencing Chris Schmeltzer on February 9, Judge Peterson told Schmeltzer he

needed to impose the 72-month sentence because, “I have to protect the public and provide adequate punishment. You are not evil, but I want everyone to know the court takes this crime seriously and it will punish everyone involved. The community should know you did not get the mandatory minimum. You are a repeat offender and you did this while you were on supervision.”

In sentencing Joe Kujawa on March 3, Judge Peterson told Kujawa he was responsible for distributing over 58 kilograms of methamphetamine, which translated to 2.3 million individual doses. The judge noted there were only 166,000 people living in Lincoln and Marathon counties combined, and that Kujawa’s actions had an enormous impact because of his marketing plan in those communities. The judge found that Kujawa took “the meth market to a new level in Lincoln County and Merrill.”

In sentencing Anthony Rogers on March 7, Judge Peterson stated that Rogers “stepped up to the big leagues in drug dealing,” and that Rogers “made a difference by flooding the meth market with cheap meth.” The judge also told Rogers “you were good at it and you had a big impact on others.”

Finally, in sentencing Patrick Keenan on March 8, Judge Peterson told Keenan that Keenan’s “code of silence” by not “snitching” on his co-defendants, and by having them listen to the song “Duck Tape” was part of a “perverted and destructive ideology.” The judge noted that such conduct allows criminal acts to continue and “the idea this is somehow honorable is incorrect.” Judge Peterson also explained to Keenan that Keenan was not there because of the prosecutor, or the police, or the pharmaceutical industry, but because of what Keenan did. The judge said, “You stepped up and embraced the role of being a drug dealer. You are being punished because of that. You made addicts worse in your community. You degraded that community by flooding the market with cheap meth.”

The charges against these defendants are the result of an investigation conducted by the Wausau office of the Wisconsin Department of Justice, Division of Criminal Investigation; the Lincoln County Sheriff’s Office; the Wausau office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation; the Drug Enforcement Administration; the Marathon County Sheriff’s Department, Special Investigations Unit; the Wausau Police Department; and IRS Criminal Investigation. The prosecution of this case is being handled by Assistant U.S. Attorney Daniel Graber.