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NEWS

A SARASOTA DRUG sting brings results 10 arrests, and a million-dollar supply of cocaine taken off

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When Sarasota Police Chief Bernadette DiPino met with Newtown residents at a block party last month, she promised that the department would rid the neighborhood of drug dealers.

She and the officers said the same thing to the men lingering on the corner -- a warning, she called it.

Efforts to fulfill those words were already in the works.

On Tuesday, the department announced the results of an 18-month investigation called Operation Sarasota Cartel II. A similar sting was conducted from 2008 to 2012.

Ten people were arrested, \$115,000 in cash was seized, \$1 million worth of powder cocaine -- 12 kilos -- was recovered and five cars were confiscated.

The suspects, who have extensive criminal histories, face anywhere from three to 15 years in prison.

"Our main goal was to dismantle a local drug organization from bottom to top," DiPino said.

It started when undercover detectives gained information regarding alleged street-level drug dealer Irvin Brown, 26, said to be operating in the area of Leon Avenue - where the police force's block party was held last month.

"We monitored his activities for a length of time and he was able to lead us to the distributor," Lt. Pat Ledwith said.

Both Roderick Shannon, 44, and Al Muta Hawks, 36, were allegedly dealing in increments of one to nine ounces of cocaine as "mid-level distributors," Ledwith said.

Eventually, detectives tracked the activity to Alex Gomez, 46, who was allegedly supplying kilos of cocaine to those distributors and dealers.

Gomez, from Miami, has previously served prison time for trafficking cocaine, Ledwith said.

"Once we identified who the supplier was, things moved rather quickly," Ledwith said, adding that the investigation had picked up in the last few months. "These individuals were rather comfortable in dealing within this area, so we were able to follow their habits for quite a while."

The investigation, which included tapping suspects' phones, led to the arrest of six others.

The first phase of the ongoing operation culminated in the events of Jan. 22, when detectives executed eight search warrants, garnering the cash, cocaine -- including 11 kilo bricks -- and vehicles, including a Cadillac and a Dodge Charger.

"The timing on this has to be so perfect," Ledwith said. "Otherwise you lose money, you lose narcotics, you lose people."

Sarasota police worked with the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, the Manatee County Sheriff's Office, the Bradenton Police Department and the State Attorney's Office.

"The way they did this investigation is storybook," said James DiCaprio, assistant special agent in charge for the DEA. "A lot of times when you do these investigations they become fragmented and you miss someone."

"In this investigation they dropped the net. They got the supplier who was bringing it to Sarasota and were able to grab the whole organization."

Ledwith said the continuing inquiry could yield additional arrests.

Before stepping down from the podium at Tuesday's news conference, DiPino issued another stern warning to drug dealers:

"We are coming after you and we are going to get you," she said. "Find another place to deal drugs because it's not going to be in the city of Sarasota. We're not going to let you continue this in our community."