

El Paso Police Department
Herman Goldstein Award Nomination
May 2003

Stash House Task Force
Abstract

El Paso, Texas is the largest city located directly on the U.S./Mexico border, and one of the fastest growing cities in the United States, with a current city/county population of 679,622. In the 1990's, the El Paso/Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, corridor became a major entrance and staging point for distribution of narcotics throughout the United States, as drug cartels in Mexico became more powerful and organized.

The crush of urban traffic at the international ports of entry, both passenger and commercial, makes it next to impossible to adequately search all of the commuters, which aids the smugglers in their activities.

Several drug trafficking organizations utilize *stash houses* in the El Paso area to temporarily store large quantities of illegal narcotics. It is estimated that the El Paso/Juarez area has over 100 such sites at any given time. Frequently, more than 1,000 pounds of the drug are stored at the stash house location. The drugs are then repackaged and distributed to other cities throughout the United States.

The Stash House Task Force was created in 1999 to disrupt and dismantle drug trafficking organizations by seizing narcotics and assets and by arresting and incarcerating the individuals involved. The El Paso Police Department is the lead agency for the program, which involves representatives from the El Paso County Sheriff's Department, the DEA, the FBI, and the INS.

The Stash House Task Force uses proactive investigative techniques that include recruiting and training various resources such as utility meter readers, sanitation workers, postal workers, property management agencies and neighborhood crime watch groups, to identify and report possible stash houses to the unit.

The program addresses problems on both a local and national level. Stash houses are usually not well maintained and prove to be an eyesore to the residents. The sheer nature of drug trafficking often attracts undesirable persons to these stash houses. This atmosphere breeds criminal activity making the neighborhood an unsafe place.

Nationally, El Paso is known as a major corridor for the transportation of narcotics into the United States. Once the drugs are brought to the stash house, they are repackaged and prepared for distribution to cities throughout the country. By identifying, investigating and ultimately closing down the stash houses, the unit disrupts and reduces the flow of narcotics to the rest of the United States.

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Scanning

The city of El Paso is one of the twenty largest cities in the United States with a combined city/county population of 679,622 people. El Paso is located on the United States / Mexico border and is adjacent to the largest border city in Mexico - Juarez. The city of Juarez has an estimated population of approximately two million people. Separating the two cities, and countries, is the Rio Grande River and in some points no more than an imaginary line in the sand. There are three official ports of entry into the United States from Mexico within the city limits of El Paso and another approximately 15 miles east of the city at Fabens, TX. It is estimated that the ports of entries process approximately twenty million people and vehicles each year.

It is common practice for drug trafficking organizations to utilize the ports of entry to import their illegal product into the United States from Mexico. Most of these drugs originate in Mexico and South America, however drugs are also routed from around the world and shipped through Mexico to cross this land border as well. The drugs are loaded in vehicles ranging from small compact cars and motorcycles to tractor-trailers and train cars. Some of the drugs are loaded into compartments in gas tanks, spare tires and vehicle panels and some drugs are merely loaded in trunks or boxes that are placed in the back seats of vehicles and driven across the bridges. In addition to the ports of entry, the drug trafficking organizations smuggle drugs into the country by truck, plane, animals and on foot. Once outside the city, the border is sparsely

populated and the river runs low or empty in many sections. Smuggling trends and techniques are limited only by the imagination of the narcotics offender, who has time, location and an unlimited amount of resources available to import their drugs.

Once the drugs arrive in the United States, more specifically in the El Paso **area**, the drug trafficking organizations need locations in which to remove them from compartments, stock pile or warehouse, repackage and further facilitate the shipment of these drugs from the area to the destination cities throughout the United States. Drug trafficking organizations have utilized residential houses throughout the El Paso area to meet this need for **years**. In addition to houses, the organizations also utilize warehouses, storage facilities, trailers and other vehicles to store and prepare the drugs for shipment. This is a situation that has an effect on not only the El Paso area, but also the entire nation.

Analysis

The El Paso area has numerous law enforcement agencies that operate counter drug operations in the El Paso area. Each agency or Task Force is responsible for the seizure of tons of narcotics each year. Each agency has had occasion to make seizures from "Stash Houses" in the area, however each entity suffered from the same lack of personnel to proactively investigate the Stash House problem as a full time occupation. The lack of an organized approach to the investigation of stash houses resulted in a hit and miss approach to locating and dismantling stash house operations in the area.

Response

In 1998, the problem and the idea of a Stash House Initiative was proposed to the executive board of the West Texas Region of the Southwest Border HIDTA. The proposal suggested that the Task Force would follow HIDTA regulations in being a multi-agency task force, combining local law enforcement personnel and federal agents. The El Paso Police Department's Narcotics section commander proposed the task force. The El Paso Police Department made a commitment to be the lead agency in the task force by agreeing to assign three investigators and one Sergeant to the task force. The El Paso Police Department also provided office space to be shared by the El Paso Police Department's Narcotics section, the HIDTA Hotel/Motel Task Force and the Stash House Task Force. The El Paso County Sheriff's Office agreed to supply one full time investigator to the unit, as did the D.E.A. and I.N.S.

The proposal, based on the successes of **Hotel/Motel** operations in the El Paso area, as well as nationwide, suggested that the task force would compile a list of indicators that were common for the stash houses that had been previously investigated in the area. The task force would then identify possible sources of information and provide training to those sources on the recognition of the indicators. The sources would then provide information to the task force and the investigations that would follow would lead to stash houses throughout the area. The indicator list was compiled from numerous investigations in the area. The more common traits of these homes were made into a list to be provided to prospective sources of information. The indicator list includes:

1. Most drug stash houses are rental homes.
2. Stash house caretakers prefer homes with attached garage.

3. Yard is unkempt, although sometimes they will send someone periodically to clean it up so as to not draw attention to it.
4. There is usually little, if any, furniture in the home.
5. Stash house occupants tend to keep to themselves, and they will not be visible on a daily basis.
6. If the occupants are actually living at the stash house, they will not appear to hold a regular job, or have a "normal" pattern of lifestyle.
7. Different types of vehicles, especially vans and pickup trucks will enter and exit the garage at different hours of the day or night. (Quite often they prefer to work in the night time or early morning hours).
8. The vehicles arriving at the stash house will have different license plates on them, including, Texas, New Mexico, Mexico and paper "buyer" or "dealer" tags. They may also use these license plates interchangeably with all of the vehicles.
9. You may not see anyone at the stash house for several days or weeks, and then there will be a lot of activity (as described above) at the house.
10. There may be an accumulation of advertisement material on the front door.
11. Stash house occupants do not usually put their trash out for regular collection, but instead, prefer to dump it at another location themselves.

The next step in the process was to identify prospective sources of information, or a list of those persons that would most likely be in a position to observe the indicators and be able to provide assistance in observing activity at the various locations. A list was compiled of citizen's groups and workers that would not be out of place in neighborhoods throughout the city:

1. Property management and real estate groups: Past investigations involving stash houses show that the vast majority of stash houses are leased properties. Common indicators of persons leasing or renting a stash house include paying for several months' rent up front at the signing of the lease. Members of the stash house initiative provide ongoing training to the real estate groups on recognizing indicators of a stash house.
2. Utility Meter Readers: Typically, stash houses do not use the "normal" amount of electricity, gas, or water. Contacts would be made with the meter readers and ongoing training is provided for them in recognizing indicators of a stash house.
3. Sanitation Workers: Stash houses do not have a "normal" occupancy, and they will discard very little trash or no trash at all. Stash house traffickers usually stockpile their trash in the house and then will dump it themselves. The sanitation workers are able to assist the initiative by identifying houses displaying these indicators.
4. Neighborhood Crime Watch Groups: The **HIDTA** stash house initiative members regularly attend the Neighborhood Crime Watch meetings in order to provide training on recognizing stash houses.
5. Postal Workers: Stash houses normally accumulate a large amount of "junk mail". Occupants of stash houses do not normally check their mail everyday. Contacts and ongoing training is given to the postal workers in recognizing indicators of a stash house.

Following the presentation of the proposal to the executive board, the initiative received full funding for the 1999 fiscal year.

Assessment

Preparation began to implement the task force, even prior to the receipt of the HIDTA funding. During this time, the media was recruited and several news releases were made to familiarize the citizens with the idea. Immediately the calls came in regarding possible Stash Houses in the neighborhoods of El Paso. Although funding was not received, and the task force officers were not all in place, until June of 1999, the task force obtained tremendous results. By the end of the calendar year, the task force had seized 7,956 pounds of marihuana, 2,063 pounds of cocaine, \$91,115.00 in currency and made 39 arrests. The F.B.I. requested to come on board and dedicated one full time agent to the task force. The initiative commander was recognized by to Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) by receiving an award for outstanding initiative commander.

The unit had successes and recognized the ability of the drug trafficking organizations to change and adapt their styles and trends. Alternate methods of investigation were conceived as some of the organizations changed the methods of operations. Although, the typical "Stash House" is still common, it was discovered that many organizations were now utilizing storage facilities, and small warehouses to conduct their **trade**. In addition to this, many organizations merely kept their products in the vehicles and were leaving them parked on city streets and in parking lots until they were prepared to move them out of town. The unit utilizes canine officers to combat all of these methods and have had tremendous success.

During the 2000 calendar year the unit seized 14,495 pounds of marihuana, 456 pounds of cocaine, \$48,463.00 in currency and arrested 52 narcotics related offenders. The Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), again, recognized the unit when the unit received the award for Outstanding Interdiction Effort of the Year for 2000.

In calendar year 2001, the unit made seizures of 18,665 pounds of marihuana, 883 pounds of cocaine, and \$684,137.00 in currency. 72 arrests were made during the year. Five cases led to the investigation of stash houses being used for the illegal alien smuggling trade and 116 illegal aliens were referred to ENS and Border Patrol as a result of these investigations.

For the year 2002 the unit conducted 43 investigations, which have led to the seizure of 25,625 pounds of marihuana, 1,739 pounds of cocaine and \$447,155 in currency. Additionally, 76 arrests were made for the year.

The Stash House Initiative has had tremendous support from civic groups, such as Neighborhood Watch Groups, and regularly gives presentations on the identification of Stash Houses found in the community.

Since the inception of the unit, the following seizures have been made:

Marihuana	68,798.10 pounds
Cocaine	5,141.48 pounds
Arrests	245
Currency	\$1,270,870

These seizures not only affect the city of El Paso, but destination cities throughout our nation.

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