

**Kent Bitsko**

**Executive Director**

**Nevada High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area**

I am Kent Bitsko, the Executive Director of the Nevada HIDTA, High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area program. I retired from the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department after 31 years, including three different assignments in narcotics totaling 8 years. During my last five years with the police department, I served as the K-9 commander working with narcotics detection dogs. I have been the Executive Director of the NV HIDTA for the last four years, totaling 17 years of narcotics experience.

Through my testimony, I am prepared to brief this panel on four cases that I believe are indicative of the type of impact the Mexican cartels have had on narcotic trafficking in the state of Nevada.

**CASE 1:**

In 2008, Cole Puffinburger was a six-year-old child whose grandfather, Clemens Tinnemeyer, was a drug trafficker for the Sinaloa drug cartel. As part of his drug trafficking duties on behalf of the cartel, Mr. Tinnemeyer drove an RV loaded with 247 kilos of cocaine from the west coast to the east coast. During these trips, Mr. Tinnemeyer made drug deliveries to various locations and collected drug proceeds from these deliveries. Mr. Tinnemeyer admitted to making six of these drug delivery and collection trips. Ultimately, Mr. Tinnemeyer decided during the return on the sixth such trip that he would steal the money from the sale of the cocaine. It is estimated that during his final trip, Mr. Tinnemeyer stole \$4.5 million of the drug cartel's proceeds and then went into hiding.

The facts become somewhat unclear and contested at this point, but intelligence derived from the investigation of this matter indicates that the Sinaloa cartel ordered two local Las Vegas conspirators to kidnap young Cole Puffinburger in order to bring his grandfather out of hiding in order to retrieve cartel money or take revenge on Mr. Tinnemeyer. Eventually, Cole Puffinburger was recovered safely and unharmed after being released in a Las Vegas neighborhood. The Nevada HIDTA Investigative Support Center worked closely with the Southern Nevada Fusion Center to provide information that led to the prosecution and also information concerning Mr. Tinnemeyer's involvement with the Sinaloa drug cartel.

**CASE 2 (Photo #1 and Photo #2):**

I have included photos in your packet of items discovered as a result of a search warrant and ultimately the successful culmination of the Sanchez case. The Sanchez case was a joint law enforcement effort between the DEA Group 1, the FBI, the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, and the Southern Nevada Drug Task Force.

The case started with a meeting at the Mandalay Bay Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada, between members a drug trafficking organization and undercover law enforcement agents. Numerous controlled narcotics transactions transpired over the following weeks. On June

30, 2010, members of the task force executed a buy-bust on Sanchez and his criminal associates. As a result of this enforcement action, agents and officers seized 1.5 kilograms of methamphetamine, 1 pound of heroin, and 1 handgun.

Intelligence information gathered during the investigation lead to a search warrant on a stash house at 5900 W. Tropicana, a trailer park in the west central part of Las Vegas, Nevada. During the execution of the search warrant at the stash house, 2 kilograms of cocaine, 3.5 kilograms of methamphetamine, 3 handguns, an AR-15 assault rifle, and a bullet-proof vest were seized.

As depicted in the photographs, the most interesting discovery was a hidden vault found under the mobile home. As illustrated in the photographs, the sophistication and construction of the vault was extraordinary and impressive. The construction of this vault cost in excess of \$20,000 in a mobile home that wasn't worth \$15,000.

Telephone toll information and analysis tied this drug trafficking organization directly to cells of the La Familia drug cartel located in Michoacán, Mexico, and also to contacts in Riverside, California. As is common in dealing with the drug cartels, none of the suspects would cooperate with law enforcement to further the investigation, each suspect stating they were afraid of the drug cartel, in this case, the La Familia drug cartel.

#### **CASE 3:**

The NV HIDTA Southern Nevada Drug Task Force began working an investigation and case in 2007. That task force is continuing to work components of this case today. During the course of the investigation, the task force has seized 42 kilos of cocaine, 150 kilos of methamphetamine, \$1.1 million in bulk cash, and served 42 search warrants upon suspects and targets identified through the investigation. As noted, the investigation is on-going. The task force has utilized wire intercepts on 114 telephone lines and has arrested 65 suspects as part of this ongoing investigation. Part of this group has been identified as a La Familia drug cartel cell operating out of the Las Vegas area. Through this continuing investigation, the Southern Nevada Drug Task Force has been able to work with DEA's Special Operations Division and coordinate their efforts nationwide to help disrupt numerous La Familia drug cartel cells.

#### **CASE 4: (Photo #3)**

This spun-off into another La Familia drug cartel cell in Las Vegas, the Menó case. In telephone intercepts, the cell head was talking directly to two subjects in the hierarchy of La Familia drug cartel and was coordinating methamphetamine and cocaine shipments into Las Vegas, Nevada, but also into Dallas, Texas, Atlanta, Georgia, Chicago, Illinois, New York City, and the states of California, Oklahoma, and Colorado. The targeted individual was operating as a trans-shipment point for the La Familia drug cartel. The target individual used a tracker-trailer on behalf of the La Familia drug cartel to pick-up shipments of 150 kilos of cocaine per trip and then delivered it to the aforementioned locations.

Phone intercepts on one occasion had him delivering a load of bulk cash of \$450,000 into Las Vegas, Nevada, before it was shipped to Mexico.

These four cases are just a brief sketch of the kind of cases we are dealing with in Nevada. These cases and the ensuing investigations are having a significant financial and manpower impact, especially on Southern Nevada law enforcement and prosecution agencies working narcotics enforcement.

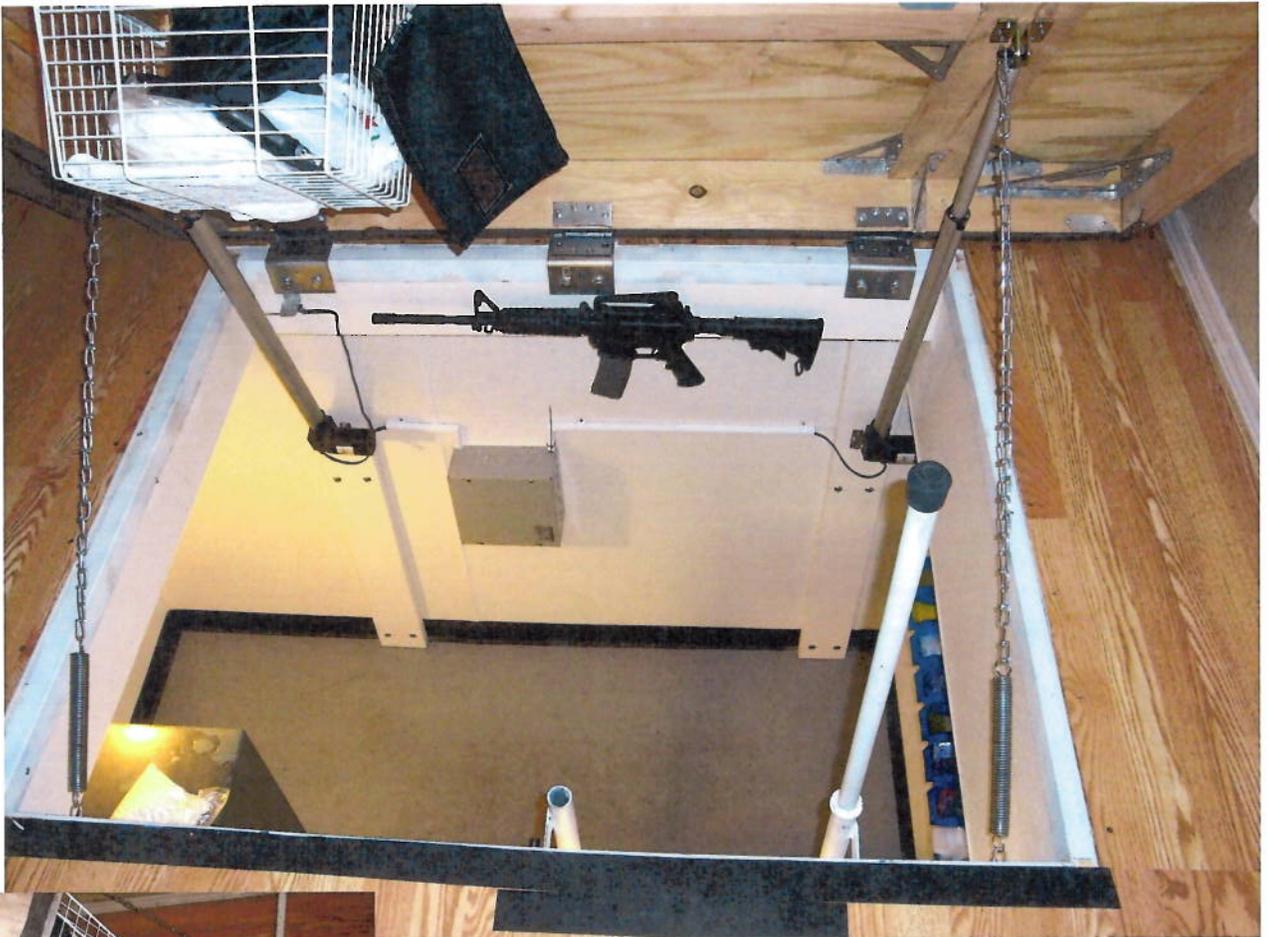
The drug trafficking organizations that have direct connections to the Mexican drug cartels are always evolving and changing their tactics. They are using Skype, Blackberry email accounts, and posting email drafts on their email sites and then giving their customer the access code to get into the account. Another technique used by the drug trafficking organizations that has presented a challenge is the use of Mexico cell service and the push-to-talk phone feature which makes it impossible to get subscriber information.

The NV HIDTA has enabled Nevada law enforcement agencies to attack these types of organizations. In the past, the individual agencies worked on a smaller scale and weren't able to dismantle the entire organizations or get to the heads of these cartel cells.

The NV HIDTA has been able to bring together all of the law enforcement agencies responsible for working narcotic enforcement in both in Clark and Washoe Counties. The NV HIDTA has 12 enforcement task forces and four administrative groups, including our Investigative Support Center which is instrumental in working these types of cases and being able to follow the trail back to the connections in Mexico.

Virtually all of the methamphetamine, cocaine, and heroin in Nevada comes from Mexico through either Southern California or Arizona. Southern Nevada also gets a large portion of its marijuana from Mexico. To give you a small indication of the impact the drug trade has on Nevada, the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department Narcotics Bureau reported eight homicides connected to just the marijuana trade in Southern Nevada during 2010. This included a 12-year-old girl killed in a home invasion that was motivated by money owed from marijuana transactions.

Photo #1

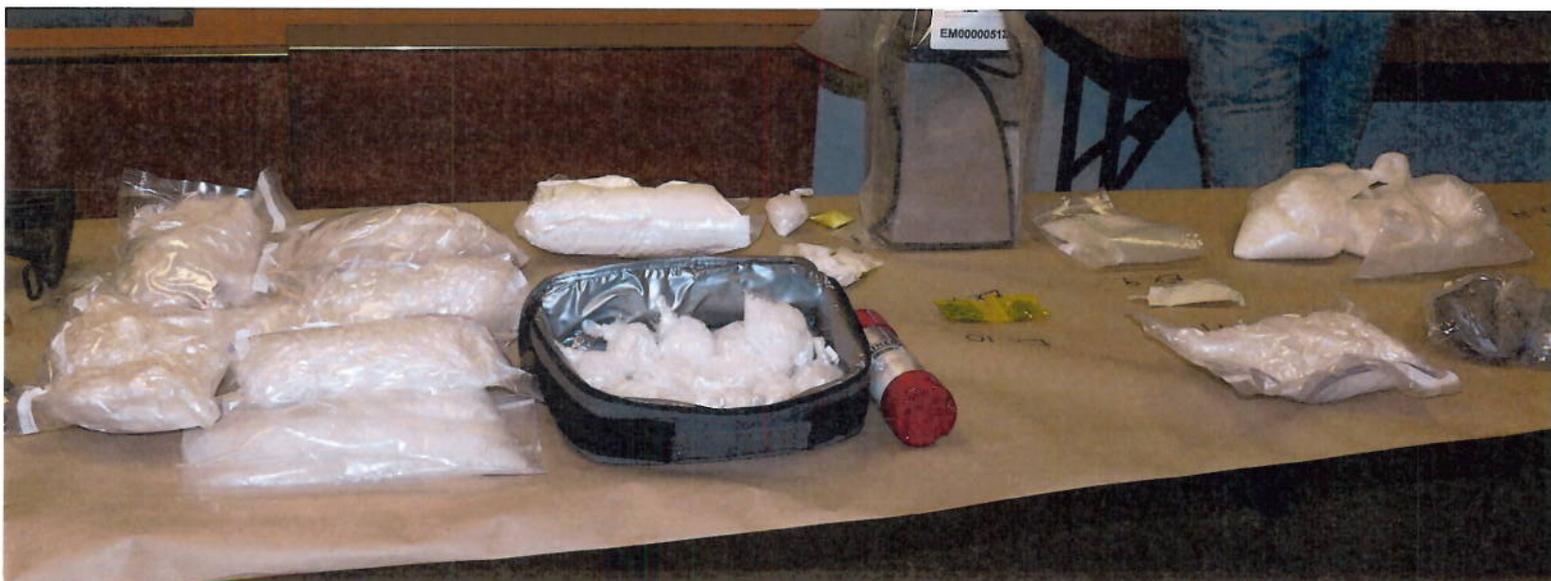


Concealed vault, guns and bullet-proof vest taken after serving a search warrant on this case



Photo #2

Narcotics seized after  
serving the search warrant



16 pounds of methamphetamine found  
in the pictured compartment during  
the arrest of the suspect.

Photo #3

