

Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Southern District of Florida

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Four South Florida Residents Convicted and Sentenced for Roles in Narcotics Importation and Distribution Ring

On Friday, October 19, 2018, the last of four defendants was sentenced for his role in a narcotics importation and distribution ring, operating in Miami-Dade and Osceola Counties, involving an analogue of the powerful opioid fentanyl, as well as n-ethylpentalone.

Ariana Fajardo Orshan, U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Florida, Mark Selby, Special Agent in Charge, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations (ICE-HSI), Christopher Cave, Special Agent in Charge, U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General (USPS-OIG), Antonio J. Gomez, Inspector in Charge, U.S. Postal Inspection Service (USPIS), Miami Division, and Diane J. Sabatino, Director, Field Operations, Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Miami Field Office, made the announcement.

According to court records, Johan Stephen Paniagua, 26, of Miami-Dade County, Saul Rivera, a U.S. Postal Service employee, 33, of Miami-Dade County, Ernest Lee Warren, 40, of Osceola County, and Jacqueline Santiago, a U.S. Postal Service employee, 30, of Miami-Dade County, pled guilty for their involvement with a drug trafficking organization that used the United States mail system to import controlled substance analogues into south Florida.

Over the course of the year-long investigation, law enforcement determined that Paniagua ordered multiple kilograms of fentanyl (methoxyacetylfentanyl) and Pentylone (n-ethylpentalone) analogues using the dark web. These substances were shipped to the United States from China. Paniagua then enlisted Rivera, a mail carrier, to divert the parcels from the mail stream and distribute them to Paniagua and other members of the drug trafficking organization, including Warren, who served as a drug mule. Santiago, also a mail carrier, assisted by diverting parcels on days that Rivera was not at work.

“The opioid epidemic is a national health emergency that will not be ignored,” said U.S. Attorney Fajardo Orshan. “The U.S. Attorney’s Office and our law enforcement partners remain committed to the prosecution of individuals who illegally import and distribute prescription painkillers, including synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, into our local South Florida communities. The systemic abuse of opioids poses a grave danger to the public’s safety. Concerned citizens are encouraged to report suspected traffickers of controlled substances (including heroin, fentanyl and other opioids) directly to law enforcement.”

"This case signifies the importance of our efforts to combat the importation and distribution of fentanyl within our communities who are being negatively influenced by a steady influx of this illegal and deadly narcotic," said Special Agent in Charge for HSI Miami Mark Selby. "HSI and its law enforcement partners are committed to increasing our enforcement by targeting dark web sales of opioids, following money trails and leveraging our international, federal, state and local law enforcement partnerships to dismantle the opioid smuggling rings and stop this endemic crisis from spreading any further."

“These federal convictions and sentences reflect the hard work of our special agents who vigorously investigated this narcotics scheme,” said USPS-OIG Special Agent in Charge Christopher Cave. “The USPS-OIG, along with our law enforcement partners, will continue to aggressively pursue these investigations. These crimes will not be tolerated and our agency will remain vigilant.”

“The Postal Inspection Service will continue to work with our partners, to stop the flow of dangerous drugs onto the streets of our community,” said Miami Division Postal Inspector in Charge Antonio J. Gomez. “Enforcing the laws that defend the nation's mail system from illegal use, are at the core of our mission.”

"Fentanyl, originally prescribed to combat extreme pain associated with cancer and end-of-life palliative care, has become one of the deadliest drugs on the street," stated CBP Port Director Christopher D. Maston, Miami International Airport. "It is estimated by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) that fentanyl overdoses are on the rise and its victims know no age, demographic, or geographical region. The men and women of CBP are steadfast in their commitment to keeping these opioids out of our communities and out of the hands of our children".

Paniagua, the final defendant, was sentenced on October 19, 2018. He pled guilty to conspiracy to import a controlled substance analogue on April 16, 2018 (Case No. 17cr20880). Judge Scola sentenced Paniagua to 80 months in prison.

Rivera and Warren pled guilty to conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute a controlled substance analogue on January 19, 2018 (Case No. 17cr20637). On April 30, 2018, U.S. District

Judge Robert N. Scola sentenced Rivera and Warren to 48 months and 24 months in prison, respectively.

Santiago pled guilty to mail theft by a postal employee on December 28, 2017 (17cr20791). On February 28, 2018, U.S. District Judge Jose E. Martinez sentenced Santiago to probation.

This investigation and prosecution was carried out by members of the South Florida High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) Task Force. The South Florida HIDTA, established in 1990, is made up of federal, state and local law enforcement agencies who, cooperatively, target the region's drug-trafficking and money laundering organizations. The South Florida HIDTA is funded by the Office of National Drug Control Policy, which sponsors a variety of initiatives focused on the nation's illicit drug trafficking threats.

U.S. Attorney Fajardo Orshan commended the investigative efforts of HSI, USPS-OIG, USPIS, and CBP. This case was prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Jonathan K. Osborne.

Related court documents and information may be found on the website of the District Court for the Southern District of Florida at www.flsd.uscourts.gov or on <http://pacer.flsd.uscourts.gov>.

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