

DEA wrapping up 4-state prescription drug crackdown in South

May 20 2015, by Alicia A. Caldwell And Claudia Lauer

Federal drug agents raided medical clinics, pharmacies and other locations across the South on Wednesday, wrapping up what a federal official called a long-running crackdown on prescription drug abuse.

The early morning raids in Arkansas, Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi were the final stage of an operation launched last summer by the Drug Enforcement Administration's drug diversion unit, a senior DEA official said ahead of the raids, speaking on condition of anonymity because the official was not authorized to describe details of the investigation before a public announcement set for later in the day.

Before Wednesday's raids, 140 people had been arrested and agents expected to make 170 more arrests, the official said. Suspects in the DEA's "Operation Pilluted" include doctors and pharmacists, the official said. The crackdown is focused on the illegal sale of painkillers, including the powerful opioids oxycodone and hydrocodone.

DEA agents in Arkansas raided a medical clinic Wednesday morning within sight of its local office, detaining six, and also swept into a pharmacy a mile away. One worker at the Bowman Curve Pharmacy in Little Rock was handcuffed and taken away by a city policeman assisting in the raids, while DEA took in cardboard boxes in their search for evidence.

The KJ Medical Clinic was often protected by a security guard while another employee was often stationed outside to direct traffic when

patients start showing up around 6:45 each morning. Six people were taken away by police—one uniformed guard and another man identified as security personnel, two nurses, a doctor and a man identified as the office manager.

The doctor, asked if he was selling pills illegally, told reporters, "No."

In Mobile, Alabama, agents are targeting two doctors accused of running multiple pain clinics, the official said.

The DEA official said 24 doctors, pharmacies and others have surrendered their DEA registration numbers as part of the ongoing crackdown. A registration number is required to prescribe certain medications. The agency is moving to revoke prescribing permission in at least 24 other cases, the official said.

People arrested in the crackdown face a variety of state and federal criminal charges, including distribution of a controlled substance and conspiracy to distribute a controlled substance.

Prescription drug abuse and overdoses involving opioids have been a growing concern for the DEA and public health officials. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention about 44 overdose deaths a day involve prescription opioids.

DEA prescription data show that Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana were among the top 11 states for prescribing hydrocodone in 2014.

Law enforcement officials also have warned that people who become addicted to prescription painkillers often turn to heroin when it becomes too difficult to get a prescription.

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