

Drug company, 4 people indicted in US painkiller probe

July 18 2019, by Dan Sewell

Federal authorities said Thursday an Ohio-based wholesale drug distributor that's been linked before to the opioid drug crisis has been charged in a painkiller pill distribution conspiracy case.

In addition, two former executives of Miami-Luken—the president and compliance officer—and two pharmacists were indicted Wednesday in U.S. District Court in Cincinnati, according to U.S. Attorney Benjamin Glassman.

By late morning Thursday, three of the four suspects had been arrested, charged with conspiring to distribute controlled substances. The pharmacists worked in West Virginia pharmacies in the towns of Oceana and Tug Valley.

There was no answer Thursday at the number listed for Miami-Luken in Springboro, a suburban city some 18 miles (29 kilometers) south of Dayton. The Dayton Daily News reported earlier this year that the company was in the process of dissolving amid mounting legal problems.

Richard Blake, an attorney who has previously represented the company, said Thursday he was unaware of the charges.

Prescription opioid statistics made public this week underscored how [pill](#) distribution soared as the nation's overdose epidemic grew.

Miami-Luken distributed 120 million pills from 2006 through 2012,

according to newly public federal data published by The Washington Post. An Associated Press analysis found that 11.4 million of those pills, or nearly 10%, went to Mingo County, West Virginia, an area with a population of about 24,000. The company was the top opioid pill distributor in the county over that stretch; it was in the top five of only one neighboring county, Kentucky's Martin County, where the company distributed 574,000 pills over that span.

The company has been named in lawsuits pending before a federal judge in Cleveland. More than 2,000 state, local and tribal governments have sued members of the [drug](#) industry.

West Virginia's attorney general in 2016 settled a lawsuit for \$2.5 million against Miami-Luken, resolving allegations that the company failed to detect, report and stop the flood of suspicious drug orders into the state.

As part of the settlement, Miami-Luken was required to report suspicious orders to West Virginia State Police and the attorney general's office within 72 hours of discovering them.

The company has been linked to alleged "pill-mill" operations in the Appalachian region that has been particularly hard-hit by painkiller overprescribing and overuse.

Investigators have said that as early as 2011, Miami-Luken was aware that Westside Pharmacy in Oceana, West Virginia, (population 1,394) was filling prescriptions for doctors located hours away, and that a large number of prescriptions for hydrocodone and oxycodone were paid for with cash. Yet, congressional findings stated the company continued to supply the pharmacy with more than 3.36 million opioids over the next four years.

A pharmacist at Westside Pharmacy was one of the individuals charged Thursday.

The federal judge in Cleveland who is overseeing most of the cases against drug companies this week ruled that detailed drug-shipment data from 2006-2012 compiled by the Drug Enforcement Administration should be made public over the industry's objections.

West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and Nevada all received more than 50 pills for every man, woman and child each year. Several areas in the Appalachian region were shipped an average of well over 100 pills per person per year.

"It looks like a war zone down here," Perry County, Kentucky, Sheriff Joseph Engle said Wednesday. The federal data showed that on average, 175 pills a year per person were distributed in Perry County during the period covered.

Prescription and illegal opioids such as heroin and fentanyl have been factors in more than 430,000 deaths in the U.S. since 2000, according to the CDC. From 2006 to 2012, annual opioid deaths rose from under 18,000 a year to more than 23,000. During that time, prescription drugs were cited as factors in just under half the deaths.

Since then, overall opioid deaths in the U.S. have doubled, though on Wednesday the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that drug overdose deaths of all kinds probably fell last year for the first time in nearly three decades.

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