

# Herman Goldstein Award

**Name:** Deputy Chief Robert Almonte  
**Phone:** (915-564-7300)  
**Project Title:** SOUTHWEST REGIONAL IIDTA STASH-IHOUSE INITIATIVE  
**Fax:** (915-564-7066)  
**Agency:** Southwest Regional I-IIDTAIStash-Ihouse Task Force  
**E-Mail:** NIA  
 El Paso Police Department - Lead Agency  
 El Paso County Sheriff's Office  
 Drug Enforcement Agency  
 Federal Bureau of Investigation  
**Address:** 911 N. Raynor - El Paso, Texas 79903

## MDTJ 2

### Stash Mouse Task Force

#### 1: Scanning

The city of El Paso is one of the twenty largest cities in the United States with a population of nearly three quarters of a million people. El Paso is located on the United States I 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 that 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 10-15 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 the entire nation.

## II: 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 are 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.

### **III: 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 task force was proposed by the El Paso Police Department's Narcotics section commander. 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 I-otel/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 I-otel/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 included:

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 *iii* 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 I-IIDTA 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.

#### **IV: 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 over 7.950 pounds of marihuana, 2,060 pounds of cocaine, \$91,100.00 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 nearly 14,500 pounds of marihuana, 456 pounds of cocaine, \$48,500.00 in currency and arrested 52 narcotics related offenders. The unit was recognized by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), again, when the unit received the award for Outstanding Interdiction Effort of the Year for 2000.

The Stash-I-louse Initiative has had tremendous support from civic groups, such as Neighborhood Watch Groups, and regularly gives presentations on the identification of Stash-I-louses in the community.

The Task Force has begun the year 2001 at a record breaking rate, having seized 5,295 pounds of marihuana, 51 pounds of cocaine, \$56,935.00 in currency and already having arrested 23 individuals on narcotics related offenses, through March 7, 2001.

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

Marihuana	27,746 pounds
Cocaine	2,570 pounds
Arrests	114
Currency	\$196,513,00

These seizures not only effect the city of El Paso, but destination cities throu<sup>g</sup>hout our nation.