

Drug Policy Alliance
Press Release
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Contact: Deepali Gokhale 404-822-5090
Gabriel Sayegh 212-613-8048

Drug War Bureaucrats Attempt to “Draft” Convenience Store Clerks Into Failed War on Drugs

Dozens of Indian Cashiers Arrested Over Possible Misunderstandings, Many Face Decades in Prison For Simply Doing Their Jobs

Drug Policy Alliance Joins Advocates’ Call for Justice in North Georgia: Money Wasted Imprisoning Clerks Better Spent on Drug Treatment

WHAT: Courthouse Vigil and Press Conference after Pleas

WHEN: Tuesday, February 21, 12:00 p.m. (the pleas start at 10:00 a.m.)

WHERE: Federal Courthouse, 600 East First Street, Rome, Georgia, 30161

WHO: Racial Justice Campaign Against Operation Meth Merchant

Media Contact: Deepali Gokhale, 404-822-5090, stopomm@mindspring.com

Rome, GA: A coalition of community members and advocates are gathering today to demand an end to the prosecution of convenience store clerks for the crime of simply doing their jobs. In the growing trend to curb the methamphetamine use, state and federal government law enforcement are arresting store clerks for selling legal items that can be used in the production of methamphetamine, like cold medicine and lighter fluid.

In northwest Georgia, 49 convenience store owners and clerks were arrested for selling legal products that law enforcement says is being used to make methamphetamine. Of the 49 people arrested, 44 of them were of Indian descent, and the rest employed by Indian store-owners. The store owners and clerks extremely harsh penalties.

“Is every convenience store clerk in America now supposed to be responsible for what their customers do with the legal products sold in the store?” said Gabriel Sayegh, director of the state organizing and policy project of the Drug Policy Alliance. “The war on drugs has failed so miserably that overzealous law enforcement officials are arresting law-abiding citizens for legally doing their jobs. Ending methamphetamine abuse is an important goal, but we need to focus our resources on treatment, not on locking up convenience store clerks who are neither making nor selling methamphetamine.”

In Georgia, some of the clerks face up to 20 years in prison. In contrast, the maximum penalty for selling alcohol to minors is only 60 days in jail. The maximum penalty for selling tobacco to minors is one year in jail. More deaths are linked to alcohol and tobacco than to all illegal drugs combined, including methamphetamine.

"It's hard to believe that law enforcement is wasting taxpayer dollars on this case when they have yet to find even an ounce of meth," said Deepali Gokhale, campaign organizer for the Racial Justice Committee

to Stop Operation Meth Merchant. "In fact, the government informants that are known to manufacture and sell meth are walking out of prison, while South Asian store owners are walking into prison for simply doing their jobs, selling legal items at a convenience store."

Some states, like Georgia, have responded to the suspected rise in methamphetamine use by passing guidelines restricting cold medicines containing ephedrine or psuedophedrine—a key ingredient in the production of methamphetamine—to be sold behind the counter. "Putting cold medicine behind the counter is an inconvenience, but it's manageable," said Sayegh. "But expecting store clerks to know how methamphetamine is made and then determine whether or not a customer may be using their cold medicine or lighter fluid to make the illegal drug? This is beyond inconvenient, it's ridiculous. The criminalization of store clerks for legally selling products like cold medicine and lighter fluid is certainly not going to stop methamphetamine production. This is the business of law enforcement, not convenience store clerks."

Though it is difficult to measure illegal activity, some officials estimate that only 20% of domestic consumption of methamphetamine come from the small-scale domestic producers targeted by restrictions on cold and allergy medications and other household materials. The bulk of methamphetamine in the U.S today comes from so-called "super-labs" from outside the U.S. "By focusing on small South Asian convenience store owners, Operation Meth Merchant only succeeds in ruining lives through racial profiling and racial targeting," said Gokhale. "The government is scapegoating South Asians for the broader problems associated with meth addiction in north Georgia. This is wrong, unfair, and must end."

Advocates for treatment cite a voter-approved initiative in California as a better approach to dealing with methamphetamine. With more than 19,000 methamphetamine users entering treatment annually under the initiative, no other statewide program in the nation has offered treatment to more methamphetamine users. "If the federal government wants to effectively address the methamphetamine problem, then it should focus resources on what works: funding community based treatment options," said Sayegh.

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