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May 9, 2006

TO: Each Supervisor

FROM: Bryce Yokomizo, Director

SUBJECT: LOS ANGELES TIMES' ARTICLE – MAY 5, 2006
"RAID TARGETS SKID ROW DRUGS"

This is to provide you with additional information in relation to the attached May 5, 2006 Los Angeles Times article, entitled "Raid Targets Skid Row Drugs", which referenced the use of benefit checks and food vouchers to purchase illegal drugs on Skid Row.

As you know, DPSS no longer issues Food Stamp coupons and/or benefit checks, but instead issues food stamp and cash benefits through the Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) system. With EBT, food purchases can only be transacted in grocery stores or other point-of-service locations. Rather than mailing checks, County issued cash benefits are electronically transferred to participant accounts and can be debited or accessed at ATMs with an EBT card and accompanying PIN code. EBT has eliminated the illicit street sale of Food Stamps, and monthly problems related to lost, destroyed, or stolen checks.

The article indicated that government food vouchers distributed by relief workers to homeless persons and state and parolee identification cards were seized by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). The Los Angeles Times' staff reporter was unable to provide detailed information on the seized items; however, we learned from the State Parole office that food vouchers (with a grocery store specified) are issued on an as-needed basis for a parolee. On a small scale, we also issue meal vouchers (less than 100 countywide in March 2006) for those General Relief applicants who are not eligible to Food Stamp benefits. We will review the use of our vouchers with all vendors.

The article did state that drug dealers had benefit cards in their possession. The article suggests that the cards are held as collateral for those persons wishing to make drug purchases. We recognize that technology alone cannot prevent the illegal sale and abuse of drugs, but we are committed to working with the State on corrective measures to prevent potential misuse of our EBT cards.

BY:dk

Attachment

Raid Targets Skid Row Drugs

Police arrest eight for allegedly selling crack cocaine to homeless buyers paying with coins or even food vouchers.

By Jonathan Abrams
Times Staff Writer

May 5, 2006

Los Angeles police raided a hotel Thursday on the outskirts of Chinatown, arresting eight suspects in an alleged crack cocaine ring that provided a stark look at how even homeless people with only pennies to their name can fuel a burgeoning drug trade.

During the raid — the first in the LAPD's new crackdown on the downtown homeless district's crime and drug problem — officers reportedly discovered \$130,000, including \$700 in quarters, nickels, dimes and even pesos that they believe homeless people amassed by panhandling or stealing from parking meters. The money was used to buy small hits of crack cocaine, they said.

Also seized were government food voucher cards that relief workers distribute to the homeless, and state and parolee identification cards, police said. Officials believe homeless addicts used the cards as collateral to buy drugs on credit, redeeming the cards when their monthly government checks arrived. Officers also confiscated computer laptops and 40 cellphones that they said had been stolen to pay for drugs.

"We are tired of people bringing these types of drugs into a community that is so vulnerable," said LAPD Capt. Andy Smith, whose command includes the skid row area. "This is an organized pattern. They are bringing the narcotics down here just to make money."

Police booked Damian Boss, 26, Sorena Gray, 42, Freddie Jones, 37, and Cynthia Childress, 36, for alleged possession of rock cocaine for sale. The other four suspects were not immediately identified. All are part of an extended family, police said.

The arrests are part of a campaign by city and state leaders to clean up an area that is home to the largest concentration of homeless people in the western United States.

The department had considered a more radical plan to tear down skid row's ubiquitous tent cities but, after a successful court challenge by civil libertarians, decided to focus on crime, including drugs, that Los Angeles Police Chief William J. Bratton has blamed for creating a "culture of lawlessness."

While the area's drug bazaars attract buyers citywide — including movie stars — aid workers said they are particularly disturbed because the drugs are peddled just feet from major drug treatment centers.

"When the checks come out early in the month, they can just walk out onto the street and buy drugs," said Jim Howat, director of Volunteers of America, a service that runs a housing and drug rehabilitation program on skid row. "It's almost like a reinvestment period."

Smith, the LAPD captain, said pushers will "come down here late at night, complete their transaction and then go back home. They are selling the drugs as fast as people can hand them money."

According to police, LAPD Officers Jose Ferreira and Derrick Prude spotted one of the suspects — a man they said they recognized as having had a previous felony warrant on a drug possession charge — getting out of a taxicab near skid row about 2 a.m. Thursday.

The cabdriver told them he had picked up the fare at the Days Inn Downtown, a hotel in the 700 block of North Main Street. Later, Ferreira and Prude said, they found the suspect and seven other family members — four males and four females in all — at the hotel along with dozens of crack pipes, including some packaged as "two for one" deals, with a small amount of cocaine included with the pipe. Officers said they also seized six ounces of crack cocaine wrapped in cellophane and packaged in soda cans and prescription medicine bottles, a hatchet, a stun gun and knives.

Police believe the family moved from hotel to hotel, fleeing when they thought authorities were closing in. They identified the mother as the alleged ringleader and said she was saving the cash for a down payment on a house. She was not identified.

"This is not something a street officer would see on a daily basis or even a yearly basis," Ferreira said.

The suspects are expected to make their first court appearances next week. Authorities said they were searching for a ninth person who may be linked to the alleged drug operation.

Skid row, with 11,000 to 12,000 homeless living in the area bordered by 3rd, 7th, Main and Alameda streets, accounts for up to 20% of all drug crimes in Los Angeles. In December, undercover detectives posing as drug dealers there arrested 14 potential drug buyers, including Hollywood actor Brad Renfro.