

CBP's fentanyl strategy brings agencies together

Two.

That's how many pounds of fentanyl CBP seized in 2013.

In 2017, 1,476 pounds.

Soaring addict demand fed by transnational criminal organizations and easy access has made fentanyl the leading cause of overdose deaths in the U.S., killing more than 20,000 people last year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, challenging law enforcement, social service and healthcare providers.

With e-commerce, the neighborhood drug pusher is no longer needed to get a fix. Fentanyl—a synthetic opioid—can be ordered online and shipped to any doorstep. Moreover, fentanyl is lightweight and sent in small parcels making the drug tough to detect.

The unprecedented opioid addiction and overdoses has even involved the White House, prompting President Trump to declare the crisis “a national health emergency.”

While these factors have elevated fentanyl to the forefront of drug abuse, the substance has been in demand for more than a decade beginning with overprescribed addictive painkillers and is now nearly everywhere.

"In recent years the misuse of controlled prescription drugs and the growing use of heroin, fentanyl, and fentanyl analogues has spread into suburban and rural communities growing across socioeconomic classes, age groups, and races." said Roland Suliveras, the director of CBP's National Targeting Center's Cargo Division. Located just outside Washington, D.C. in Virginia, the center identifies travelers and cargo that pose risks to U.S. security including terrorists, illegal migrants, along with illicit goods and drugs.

Opioid prescriptions shot up from 76 million in 1991 to 207 million in 2013, according to a Department of Homeland Security assessment of the latest data. Moreover, the U.S. consumes nearly 100 percent of the world's Vicodin and 81 percent of Percocet.

In the past, fentanyl was obtained through pharmacy theft, phony prescriptions or illicitly sold by patients, doctors and pharmacists. Now, it's mostly smuggled into the United States as a powder.

Fentanyl trafficked across the Southwest border is sometimes combined with other narcotics such as heroin, cocaine, and meth, but it's only about 10 percent pure. Mail shipments, usually from China, can be up to 90 percent pure, said Manny Garza, CBP's director of manifest and conveyance security. Because high potency is deadly, smugglers mix the fentanyl with lactose and press them into thousands of tablets, "pill mills in someone's kitchen" as he describes it.

In fiscal 2017, CBP processed a half-billion international mail shipments arriving in the U.S.," said Garza. "How do you inspect a million parcels per day?" Nevertheless, seizures are high because of increased training and awareness, he pointed out.

In response, CBP moved forward to bring together domestic and international law enforcement and governments along with other stakeholders into a single force to combat the scourge. Outlined in the CBP strategy that targets opioids, the approach is an overarching plan for those entities to work together, share intelligence, and target the supply chain. The strategy also highlights safety for officers and Border Patrol agents on the frontline and others at risk to opioid exposure.

“CBP will strengthen our federal, state, local, tribal, commercial and international partnerships to combat opioids,” said Commissioner Kevin McAleenan, in describing the alliance. “We will work alongside law enforcement, postal, legislative and executive branch offices to meet this crisis head on and relentlessly target and interdict the transnational organizations and individuals producing and trading these poisons.”

Led by CBP's National Targeting Center, the strategy is already making headway.

CBP signed a memorandum with the U.S. Postal Service to target suspicious parcels and for the

first time postal service representatives work at the center. In addition, a new electronic system that targets and automatically shares data on suspicious mail is giving postal systems the ability to disrupt fentanyl shipments. Thirty-eight foreign postal operators including China, Hong Kong and Canada participate in the system. Before the strategy, just 23 said Army Schapiro, CBP's risk analysis and decision support branch chief who helped write the strategy.

"E-commerce has changed the drug market," she said. "The magnitude of the mail is hard to believe. It sometimes feels like a losing battle." Still, the Office of Field Operations made 437 fentanyl seizures in fiscal 2018, a 126 percent increase from the 346 seizures in fiscal 2017.

As the only agency in the U.S. that can perform pollen analysis, CBP helped the Nebraska State Patrol locate the origin of a kilo of fentanyl it seized.



One of many devices used in the field to detect contraband, this TruNarc substance analyzer identifies multiple types of narcotics. The gloved manipulators protect officers while testing for drugs. Photo courtesy of CBP NTC