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**DA Rice, CE Mangano, City & Federal Officials
Announce Takedown of Heroin Pipeline
Stretching from Mexico to NYC and Long
Island**

***Nine defendants arrested as part of multi-agency effort
to dismantle drug operation trafficking
heroin, cocaine, MDMA, & steroids on streets and over
Craigslist***

MINEOLA, N.Y. – Nassau County District Attorney Kathleen Rice was joined by Nassau County Executive Edward Mangano and city and federal officials to announce the

dismantling of a multi-million dollar illegal drug pipeline which ran directly from Mexico to New York City and Long Island as part of an investigation involving local, state and federal law enforcement.

The case has taken down a drug pipeline that has trafficked in several million dollars' worth of heroin in the New York area, as well as cocaine, MDMA (a/k/a ecstasy or molly) and anabolic steroids sold via Craigslist.

In total, nine defendants from Mexico, California, Brooklyn, the Bronx and Queens have been indicted and arrested in recent weeks as part an ongoing investigation initiated by DA Rice's office and conducted jointly with the Nassau County Police Department, the Special Narcotics Prosecutor of New York City, and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's NY Drug Enforcement Task Force, which consists of the DEA, NYC Police Department and NY State Police.

Investigators tracked the source of heroin being sold by two defendants in Nassau back to a drug pipeline centered around Bronx resident Cesar Romero-Astudillo, also known as "Menor." Romero-Astudillo led a drug trafficking network that funneled narcotics by vehicles driven from Mexico and inside "mules" flying from California – all destined for New York City and Long Island to fuel a deepening epidemic of heroin.

"This case proves that the battle lines in our fight to save lives in the midst of a devastating heroin epidemic don't end at any border. We tracked the supply of narcotics entering our region from the source, and in the process, dismantled a drug trafficking network that stretched from Mexico to New York," DA Rice said. "This case sends a strong message that those who profit from a drug trade causing misery and death for so many will be held accountable at every level of our criminal justice system. I want to thank the Office of the Special Narcotics Prosecutor, the Drug Enforcement Task Force, and the Nassau County Police Department for their diligent efforts to help bring these defendants to justice."

New York City's Special Narcotics Prosecutor Bridget G. Brennan said, "Staunching the deluge of heroin flowing to the New York area from Mexico will require an all hands on effort by local, state and federal law enforcement. This case is an example of successful collaboration. The leadership of Nassau District Attorney Kathleen Rice is greatly appreciated."

DEA Special Agent in Charge James J. Hunt said, "The nation is being besieged by heroin – over a two year period U.S. heroin overdose deaths have more than doubled. Like rubbing salt in the wound, Cesar Romero Astudillo's drug crew pushed heroin throughout the streets of NYC and Nassau County feeding heroin abuse in our communities. Today's announcement exemplifies drug law enforcement's efforts to identify and arrest those responsible at all levels of the distribution chain."

Ajay Carter, a/k/a "Jay" a/k/a Jose Zambrano, 38, of Astoria, and Miguel Tormo, 42, of Astoria, face Nassau County grand jury charges of Criminal Sale of a Controlled

Substance in the 1st Degree (an A-I felony) and Criminal Sale of a Controlled Substance in the 3rd Degree (a B felony). Carter was also charged with additional counts of Criminal Sale of a Controlled Substance in the 1st Degree and Criminal Sale of a Controlled Substance in the 3rd Degree.

Nassau County Court Judge Teresa Corrigan set bail for Carter and Tormo at \$5 million bond or \$2.5 million cash. If convicted of the top charges, Carter faces a maximum sentence of 40 years in prison and Tormo faces a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison. They are due back in court on Jan. 8, 2015.

The following individuals, being prosecuted by the Office of the Special Narcotics Prosecutor of New York, were also arrested and indicted:

- Cesar Romero-Astudillo a/k/a “Menor,” 24, of the Bronx
- Luis Alberto Mendoza Rosas a/k/a “Panzon,” 34, of the Bronx
- Carlos Reyes a/k/a “Chingon” a/k/a “Poncho,” 39, of the Bronx
- Santiago Juela, 33, of Brooklyn
- Vincent Belmontes, 24, of Riverside, Calif.
- Defendant No. 8, age 57, of Chula Vista, Calif. (not yet arraigned)
- Defendant No. 9, age 21, of Los Mochis, Mexico (not yet arraigned)

Count 1: All seven of these defendants are charged with Conspiracy in the 2nd Degree (a B felony).

Count 2: Romero-Astudillo is charged with Operating as a Major Trafficker (an A-I felony)

Counts 3 & 4: Romero-Astudillo, Rosas, Reyes, Juela, Defendant No. 8 and Defendant No. 9 are charged with Criminal Possession of a Controlled Substance in the 1st Degree (an A-I felony) and 3rd Degree (a B felony).

Count 5: Romero-Astudillo is charged with Attempted Criminal Possession of a Controlled Substance in the 1st Degree (an A-I felony).

Count 6: Defendant No. 8 and Defendant No. 9 are charged with Criminal Possession of a Controlled Substance in the 1st Degree (an A-I felony).

Manhattan Supreme Court Judge Larry Stephen held Romero-Astudillo without bail. Manhattan Supreme Court Judge Bruce Allen held Belmontes without bail. Bail for the remaining defendants who have been arraigned was set as follows by Judge Stephen:

- Mendoza Rosas, \$1 million bond or \$500,000 cash
- Reyes, \$100,000 bond or \$75,000 cash
- Juela, \$100,000 bond or cash

If convicted of the top charge, Astudillo-Romero faces a maximum sentence of 25 years to life in prison. Belmontes faces a maximum sentence of 8-1/3 to 25 years in prison. The other five defendants face a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison.

DA Rice said that in the summer of 2013, DA investigators found that Carter and Tormo were partners selling heroin via associates in person in the New York area. Carter also sold cocaine, MDMA and anabolic steroids through Craigslist. The investigation further revealed that Tormo met with individuals associated with Romero-Astudillo to purchase illegal drugs. Four undercover drug purchases totaling one pound of heroin were then made from Carter and Tormo at locations in Great Neck and Manhasset.

Working with the Drug Enforcement Task Force, DA investigators established that the heroin was being shipped directly from sources in Mexico to Romero-Astudillo, who lives in the Bronx.

In August, Romero-Astudillo, working with his assistant Mendoza Rosas, received two couriers, Defendants No. 8 and No. 9, who drove a gray Dodge Durango with fictitious California license plates and a red kayak and bicycles mounted to the exterior. The vehicle was taken to United Body Works, a body shop at 30-02 12th Street in Astoria and owned by Juela, where investigators believe that heroin was removed from a trap hidden in the vehicle and subsequently diluted and sold to numerous buyers with the assistance of Reyes. Investigators also believe that Romero-Astudillo also delivered the proceeds of the sale of narcotics to the shop, to be hidden in the Durango for transport back to Mexico.

Investigators also found that Romero-Astudillo received approximately three kilograms of heroin this August from “mules” flying from California, including Belmontes, who swallowed vessels of the drug and passed them in Romero-Astudillo’s Bronx apartment.

In September, investigators learned that the same couriers driving the same Dodge Durango were dispatched to Romero-Astudillo in the Bronx. Believing that the vehicle was transporting heroin from Mexico to New York, investigators advised the New Jersey State Police to look out for the vehicle. On Sept. 23 at about 10:36 p.m., the vehicle was located and stopped in Warren County in New Jersey. A subsequent search of the vehicle resulted in the seizure of approximately five kilograms of black tar heroin, which was hidden in the engine compartment.

Investigators determined that there were four ways the money made its way from New York to Mexico: by people physically carrying cash on their persons on planes, money orders sent to Mexico, cash hidden in vehicles and wire transfers to Mexico. The investigation is ongoing.

“The abuse of Heroin and opioids is an epidemic that affects not just Nassau County, but the entire nation,” said County Executive Mangano. “In 2013, statistics indicate that 44 people died of heroin overdoses and 115 people died of prescription drug overdoses in Nassau. The Nassau County Police Department is working daily to take down dealers,

stop the flow of drugs into our neighborhoods and catch those responsible for the death of our young people. I applaud the efforts of the DEA, the Nassau County District Attorney's Office, Nassau County Police Department, Office of the Special Narcotics Prosecutor of NYC, NYC Police Department and the New York State Police Department for working together to dismantle a multi-million dollar illegal drug pipeline which ran from Mexico to New York City and to our home here on Long Island."

"Our department is committed to protecting the public by getting heroin off our streets," said Acting Nassau County Police Commissioner Thomas C. Krumpeter. "By working with our partners in drug law enforcement, we have acted decisively to ensure that those who bring this destructive drug into our communities will be brought to justice."

New York Police Commissioner William J. Bratton said, "Heroin addiction has plagued our nation and has contributed to countless overdose deaths throughout our city and state. We remain diligent in our efforts to combat this ongoing crisis and will continue to work closely with our respective law enforcement partners to ensure that drug traffickers like the ones involved in this case are held accountable for their illegal actions."

"Once again a strong law enforcement partnership has brought down a powerful and illegal international narcotic pipeline," said Superintendent Joseph A. D'Amico of the New York State Police. "These charges should send the message that no matter where you operate, you will end up behind bars. From Mexico, to the west coast, to the east coast, this dangerous operation has been shut down and dangerous drugs stopped from reaching New York streets. I applaud our partners for their strong police work and we will continue to work together to make our communities safer from crime."

Bureau Chief Rick Whelan and Assistant District Attorneys Cristina Colon and Mayra Lopez of DA Rice's Organized Crime and Rackets Bureau are prosecuting the case involving Carter and Tormo.

Assistant District Attorney Erica O'Brien of the Office of the Special Narcotics Prosecutor is prosecuting the other seven defendants.

Carter is represented by Steven Barnwell, Esq. and Tormo is represented by Dana Grossblatt, Esq.

The defense attorneys for the five remaining arraigned defendants, handled by the Office of the Special Narcotics Prosecutor, are as follows:

- Romero-Astudillo, represented by Taylor Koss, Esq.
- Mendoza Rosas, represented by Jesse Berman, Esq.
- Reyes, represented by Peter Frankel, Esq.
- Juela, represented by Juan Mendez, Esq.
- Belmontes, represented by Susan Calvello, Esq.

The charges are merely accusations and the defendants are presumed innocent until and unless found guilty.