

# **CHATHAM-SAVANNAH COUNTER**

## **NARCOTICS TEAM**

*Everett Ragan, Director*



### **Press Release**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### **Joint CNT and DEA Operation Leads to Search Warrant of Two Local Savannah Businesses and the Seizure of Dangerous Synthetic Cannabinoids**

CHATHAM COUNTY, GEORGIA (January 23, 2019): The Chatham-Savannah Counter Narcotics Team (CNT) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) are warning the community following a joint operation resulting in a large seizure of various forms of synthetic cannabinoids at two local Savannah businesses. On Friday, January 18, 2019, CNT and the DEA's Tactical Diversion Squad executed two search warrants at local Savannah businesses, Tobacco Palace located at 139 East Montgomery Crossroads, and Tobacco Palace located at 13051 Abercorn Street Suite A-6.

The search warrants resulted in the seizure of various forms of synthetic cannabinoids, some of which are believed to contain 4-cyano CUMYL-BUTINACA also known as SGT-78, a schedule I controlled substance in the State of Georgia. Schedule I drugs, substances, or chemicals are defined as drugs with no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse. Some examples of Schedule I drugs are: heroin, lysergic acid diethylamine (LSD), and methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA/ecstasy). In addition, all similar items found inside the store were seized. A number of the seized items will be sent to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's Crime Lab for testing. The search warrants also resulted in the seizure of more than \$18,000 in cash.

As a result of the search warrants, CNT has arrested one of the store's owners, 42-year-old Hitesh Jayant Patel of Richmond Hill, Georgia. Patel turned himself in today around 2:30 p.m. Patel has been charged with one count Sale of a Controlled Substance (Schedule I) and is being held at the Chatham County Detention Center.

The joint CNT and DEA operation began in July 2018 following information from the Tybee Island Police Department. Tybee Police reported an incident where a juvenile's parents alerted authorities that their child overdosed or had a reaction after ingesting Kronic Juice, a synthetic cannabinoid. During that incident, it was reported the juvenile suffered from seizures and manic episodes immediately after ingesting the substance.

The investigation determined the substance was purchased from the Tobacco Palace located at 139 East Montgomery Crossroads in Savannah. As the investigation furthered, agents linked multiple drug-related overdoses to local high school aged students throughout Chatham County. In addition, the investigation suggested a number of high school aged students, under the age of 18, were unlawfully purchasing the items that were advertised similar to cigarette products. The lawful age to purchase those type of products is 18.

Over the course of the five-month investigation, undercover agents with CNT and DEA made multiple purchases of various forms of synthetic cannabinoids from the Tobacco Palace on East Montgomery Crossroads and the one on Abercorn Street. The purchases included but were not limited to Butterfly, Mega Gold CBD, single-use cannabidiol (CBD) vape pens, and vaporizer products Kronic Juice, Diamond, and Blaze, which are used in conjunction with vaping devices. Some of the purchased items have returned positive for schedule I controlled substance. All items purchased had to be asked for by name or code and were located behind the counter and out of view. During the investigation, agents made contact with other Georgia drug enforcement agencies who reported similar operations in their respected jurisdictions.

Said CNT Director Everett Ragan, "CNT prides itself on combating drugs in our community and that is especially the case when it involves the safety of our youth. This case is a prime example of how CNT collaborates with our local and federal partners to combat drug sales that poison our community."

Said Chatham County District Attorney Meg Heap, "As the district attorney, I find it abhorrent that anyone would sell drugs to our children. These individuals, posing as legitimate businesspeople, have created a lifetime of difficulty for some of the children who purchased their products. I want to recognize the hard work done by CNT to put a stop to the sale of illegal drugs to our children."

Tybee Island Police Chief Bob Bryson stated, "The Tybee Island Police Department appreciates that CNT takes the time to investigate every complaint that we send to them. CNT does a great job of keeping our community safe."

Robert J. Murphy, the Special Agent in Charge of the DEA Atlanta Field Division commented, "Synthetic cannabinoids, also known as "K2" or "Spice," are not manufactured in a controlled environment and the user is ultimately playing Russian roulette when consuming this product. There is no way, outside of a controlled laboratory environment, to determine the chemical make-up, synthetic ingredients or what the potential harmful effects may be. DEA, its multilevel law enforcement counterparts and the U.S. Attorney's Office are committed to keeping our communities safe by investigating and prosecuting those criminals who "push" these dangerous and potentially deadly substances."

The investigation is ongoing and additional charges and arrests are possible.

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## **Background (Source: National Institute on Drug Abuse)**

### **What are synthetic cannabinoids?**

Synthetic cannabinoids are human-made mind-altering chemicals that are sprayed and dried and then shredded to look like a plant-like material. They can be smoked, brewed, or sold as liquids to be vaporized and inhaled in e-cigarettes and other devices. These products are also known as herbal or liquid incense.

These chemicals are called cannabinoids because they are similar to chemicals found in the marijuana plant. Because of this similarity, synthetic cannabinoids are sometimes misleadingly called synthetic marijuana or fake weed, and they are often marketed as safe, legal alternatives to that drug. They are not safe and may affect the brain much more powerfully than marijuana; their actual effects can be unpredictable and, in some cases, more dangerous or even life-threatening. Synthetic cannabinoids are part of a group of drugs called new psychoactive substances (NPS). NPS are unregulated mind-altering substances that have become newly available on the market and are intended to produce the same effects as illegal drugs. Some of these substances may have been around for years but have reentered the market in altered chemical forms due to renewed popularity. Manufacturers sell these products in colorful foil packages and plastic bottles to attract consumers. They market these products under a wide variety of specific brand names. Hundreds of brands now exist, including K2, Spice, Joker, Black Mamba, Kush, and Kronic.

For several years, synthetic cannabinoid mixtures have been easy to buy in drug paraphernalia shops, novelty stores, gas stations, and over the internet. Because the chemicals used in them have no medical benefit and a high potential for abuse, authorities have made it illegal to sell, buy, or possess some of these chemicals; however, manufacturers try to sidestep these laws by changing the chemical formulas in their mixtures.

Easy access and the belief that synthetic cannabinoid products are natural and therefore harmless, have likely contributed to their use among young people. Another reason for their continued use is that standard drug tests cannot easily detect many of the chemicals used in these products.

### **How do people use synthetic cannabinoids?**

The most common way to use synthetic cannabinoids is to smoke the dried plant material. Users also mix the sprayed plant material with marijuana or brew it as tea. Other users buy synthetic cannabinoid products as liquids to vaporize in e-cigarettes.

### **What are some other health effects of synthetic cannabinoids?**

People who have used synthetic cannabinoids and have been taken to emergency rooms have shown severe effects including:

- rapid heart rate
- vomiting
- violent behavior
- suicidal thoughts
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Synthetic cannabinoids can also raise blood pressure and cause reduced blood supply to the heart, as well as kidney damage and seizures. Use of these drugs is associated with a rising number of deaths.

**Are synthetic cannabinoids addictive?**

Yes, synthetic cannabinoids can be addictive. Regular users trying to quit may have the following withdrawal symptoms:

- headaches
- anxiety
- depression
- irritability

Behavioral therapies and medications have not specifically been tested for treatment of addiction to these products. Health care providers should screen patients for possible co-occurring mental health conditions.

-----**End of release**-----

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