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## 52 public employees named as OxyContin scam suspects

BY DAVID OVALLE

School bus drivers. Garbage men. Jail officers.

In all, 52 of 62 suspects identified Wednesday as part of an illegal OxyContin and healthcare fraud ring had their salaries paid by taxpayers.

"This is a sad reality for us," said Miami-Dade State Attorney Katherine Fernández Rundle. "They are almost all public employees."

The scam, investigators believe, involved government employees who used their health benefits to cheaply buy the highly addictive painkiller, then resell the pills for maximum profit.

None of them actually needed the medication, authorities said.

Wednesday's bust included 17 Miami-Dade school bus drivers, 10 bus attendants, five school security guards and six Miami garbage men.

The bust also collared Miami-Dade Corrections Officers Lori Lucky and Reginald Fletcher, and Hialeah police Officer Danette Dell, whose alleged crime happened about a year before she became a cop in 2004.

The list also includes a school janitor, a felony court clerk and a Miami city crane operator.

### FAKE PRESCRIPTIONS

Authorities say the suspects used 130 bogus prescriptions to obtain 12,000 OxyContin pills with an estimated street value of \$381,660.

Wednesday's roundup was the second wave from the same racket, police say. In August 2005, 29 people -- including 22 schools' employees -- were nabbed in the same scam.

The prescriptions in 2005 and in Wednesday's sweep came from Dr. Ronald Harris, who was cited this week in The Miami Herald's series on Medicare fraud.

In late May, in an unrelated scam, Harris and partner Enrique Gonzalez were charged with submitting about \$26.2 million in fake Medicare claims for HIV/AIDS infusion services.

Harris, 57, and Gonzalez were also charged with laundering at least \$3.4 million in Medicare payments through sham companies.

Harris' conviction for the 2005 OxyContin charges helped pave the way for Wednesday's arrests; his cooperation helped steer Miami-Dade public corruption detectives toward their break in the OxyContin case.

The probe was spearheaded by Miami-Dade Detective Javier Garcia and Drug Enforcement Agency Agent Victoria Mcrae, and it was overseen by Assistant State Attorney Laura Uriarte.

All but 10 of the 62 suspects were arrested Wednesday in sweeps that began before sunrise.

Six "recruiters" face charges of racketeering and conspiracy to commit racketeering: Wanda McNeal, Dwonvalyn Johnson, Barbara Miller Benabe, Wynell Guyton and Marcella Pierce.

"They are the real villains in this picture," Fernández Rundle said.

The rest face grand theft charges.

The scam worked like this, investigators say:

Dr. Harris gave the recruiters blank prescriptions for OxyContin, a powerful drug -- mostly used by cancer patients -- that is considered as potent and addictive as heroin.

The recruiters would approach the employees through word of mouth. School bus drivers were coveted because, while their salary is low, their health coverage is excellent.

The employees would go to a pharmacy with one of the phony prescriptions given to them by the recruiters. They would buy a vial with 90 to 120 pills -- for a co-payment of about \$25.

They would then turn the pills over to the recruiters for between \$300 and \$500.

Presumably, the OxyContin would be sold on the streets for about \$30 or more per pill.

Authorities do not believe any of the pills were sold to schoolchildren.

Sometimes, health insurance companies would also reimburse the "patients" for the bogus claims. In all, the companies shelled out more than \$95,000, police say.

**REASSIGNED**

All school employees arrested could face termination, though their cases will be reviewed individually, said schools spokesman John Schuster.

All employees will be reassigned away from children.

Hialeah Officer Dell had been on desk assignment, relieved of patrol duties, since December.

The corrections officers have been relieved of duty with pay.