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United States General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 20548

January 12, 2001

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley
Chairman
Caucus on International Narcotics Control
United States Senate

Subject: Review of the Drug Enforcement Administration's Heroin Signature and Domestic Monitor Programs

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This letter responds to your request that we review the Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) Heroin Signature Program and its Domestic Monitor Program. You asked that we determine why there are apparent discrepancies in the 1999 statistical data generated by the two programs, particularly in the data pertaining to Southwest Asia heroin,¹ to include an explanation of why the Heroin Signature Program data shows heroin seizure information for only one U.S. Pacific Coast international airport.² Additionally, you asked that we determine whether sufficient samples relating to heroin seizures are being furnished for analysis under the Heroin Signature Program and the extent to which DEA is committed to the Domestic Monitor Program.

We interviewed knowledgeable DEA, U.S. Customs Service, and Department of Justice officials and reviewed relevant documentation. We performed our work from August 15, 2000, through December 11, 2000, in accordance with investigative standards established by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency.

Results in Brief

The discrepancies in the 1999 statistical data—for heroin produced in Southwest Asia and other areas—generated by the Heroin Signature and Domestic Monitor programs are the result of the two programs' data not being comparable. The 1999 Heroin Signature Program data identifies the source of heroin seized at specific U.S. international airports, whereas the 1999 Domestic Monitor Program data identifies the source of heroin obtained through random, undercover, retail-level heroin

¹ Southwest Asia heroin includes heroin produced in the "Golden Crescent," which includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Iran, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Afghanistan is the major producer of heroin from Southwest Asia.

² The major U.S. Pacific Coast international airports included in the Heroin Signature Program are San Diego, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, CA; Seattle, WA; and Honolulu, HI.

purchases in specific cities. According to DEA and Customs officials, Heroin Signature Program data for 1999 shows no seizure information for U.S. Pacific Coast international airports because, with the exception of the Los Angeles International Airport, no seizures occurred at such airports during 1999 that met federal prosecution guidelines. Seizures from which samples are analyzed under the program must meet federal prosecution guidelines.

DEA officials responsible for administering the Heroin Signature Program told us that they receive sufficient samples of the heroin seized by federal law enforcement agencies but receive few or no samples of the heroin seized by state and local law enforcement agencies. The Director of DEA's Special Testing and Research Laboratory also stated that the analysis of additional samples from West Coast heroin seizures by state and local authorities would broaden the statistical database used to identify trends.

According to DEA officials, DEA is committed to the Domestic Monitor Program and conducts annual field division inspections, which include verification of compliance with Domestic Monitor Program requirements. The Domestic Monitor Program enables DEA to monitor the price and purity of retail heroin sold in the United States and to provide samples for signature analysis. To further enhance this program, DEA has initiated a pilot program to analyze heroin samples provided by state and local law enforcement agencies.

Background

The Heroin Signature and the Domestic Monitor programs are trafficking-indicator programs used to detect trends in the source areas of the heroin supplied to the United States. Data from both programs, investigative intelligence, and other information are used to develop an overall assessment of heroin trafficking in the United States.

DEA's Intelligence Division administers both programs. DEA's Special Testing and Research Laboratory in Washington, D.C., conducts an in-depth chemical analysis of the heroin samples provided by both the Heroin Signature and the Domestic Monitor programs.³ Each major heroin-producing region has a unique production process or "signature," which is used to determine the origin of the sample. Signature analysis is the only scientifically based technique currently available for determining the region in which heroin encountered in the U.S. drug market was produced.

DEA initiated the Heroin Signature Program in 1971 to enhance the ability of its regional laboratories to identify the source of heroin seized in the United States from each of the world's major heroin-producing areas—South America,⁴ Mexico, Southeast Asia,⁵ and Southwest Asia. In 1977, DEA centralized the Heroin Signature

³ All heroin samples that meet the minimum weight requirement—equal to or greater than 1 gram—are eligible for signature analysis. DEA's Special Testing and Research Laboratory prefers a 1-gram sample but will accept a minimum of 500 milligrams for testing.

⁴ The South American heroin signature was developed in July 1993. This heroin is produced mainly in Columbia.

⁵ Southeast Asia heroin is produced in the "Golden Triangle," which includes Burma, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Program within the Special Testing and Research Laboratory, which receives heroin samples from randomly selected DEA seizures and purchases and from seizures by other federal agencies, including Customs. The Heroin Signature Program receives samples from heroin seizures made at U.S. ports of entry, including airports and border crossings. Samples are also obtained from seizures of heroin in letters and packages mailed to the United States via U.S. mail, Federal Express, United Parcel Service, and any other mail-handling system. The seized substances are first forwarded to DEA's regional laboratories,⁶ which conduct an initial analysis to confirm that the substance is heroin. If the substance is confirmed as heroin, the regional laboratory is responsible for preparing a written report for judicial purposes and providing a sample to DEA's Special Testing and Research Laboratory. The laboratory also receives samples of heroin for signature analysis that DEA purchases under the Domestic Monitor Program.

DEA initiated the Domestic Monitor Program in New York City (New York Field Division) in 1979. All 20 remaining field divisional cities⁷ now have the program. In addition, Orlando, Florida, and Baltimore, Maryland—which are suboffices of the Miami and Washington, D.C., field divisions, respectively—have a Domestic Monitor Program. As a result, 23 cities currently participate in the Domestic Monitor Program. In the program, DEA's field personnel make random, undercover, retail-level heroin purchases. The program was originally designed to enable DEA to monitor the price and purity of retail heroin sold in the United States; it now also provides samples for signature analysis to the Special Testing and Research Laboratory.

Statistical Data for the Two Programs Not Comparable; Lack of Data Because Seizure Guidelines Not Met at All Pacific Coast Airports

The 1999 Heroin Signature Program data identifies the source of heroin seized at selected U.S. international airports and ports of entry; and 1999 Domestic Monitor Program data identifies the source of heroin obtained from random, undercover, retail-level heroin purchases.

As shown in enclosure I, DEA received samples of heroin seizures for analysis under the Heroin Signature Program in 1999 from 18 U.S. international airports, including Puerto Rico, and an unidentified international airport. As shown in enclosure II, the source of the samples for analysis under the Domestic Monitor Program in 1999 was random, undercover, retail-level heroin purchases in 22 cities, 15 of which were cities where airport seizures were made. As indicated in enclosure I, 11.1 percent of the 1999 airport seizure samples for the Heroin Signature Program were from Southwest Asia and 64.8 percent were from South America. However, as shown in enclosure II, only 1 percent of the Domestic Monitor Program samples resulting from heroin

⁶ DEA's regional laboratories are located in Chicago, IL; Washington, DC; San Diego and San Francisco, CA; New York City, NY; Miami, FL; and Dallas, TX. Two subregional laboratories are located in Kansas City, KS, under Chicago, and San Juan, PR, under Miami.

⁷ The 20 remaining field divisional locations, referred to in this letter as "cities," are Atlanta, GA; Boston, MA; the Caribbean area; Chicago, IL; Dallas, El Paso, and Houston, TX; Miami, FL; Newark, NJ; New Orleans, LA; Denver, CO; Philadelphia, PA; Phoenix, AZ; Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego, CA; Seattle, WA; St. Louis, MO; Detroit, MI; and Washington, DC.

purchases in 1999 were from Southwest Asia while 37.4 percent were from South America.

DEA officials acknowledged that there is an apparent discrepancy between the trends identified by the charts in enclosures I and II. They told us that the program data reported by the Heroin Signature Program for a specific airport is not comparable to the source city information reported by the Domestic Monitor Program. They added that a city-by-city comparison of the source area percentages in the charts is misleading. This is particularly true with cities that have major international airports, because heroin seized at international airports may have been destined for a city other than the one where the seizure was made. For example, the statistical data for the 1999 Heroin Signature Program (enclosure I) for New York City is based on New York City airport seizures and shows that 14.8 percent of the heroin seized was from Southwest Asia. However, the 1999 Domestic Monitor Program statistical data (enclosure II) for New York City is based on the random, retail-level heroin purchases in the New York City metropolitan area and shows that 1.6 percent of the heroin purchased was from Southwest Asia. The enclosures also show that 10.5 percent of the seizures at Newark's international airport were from Southwest Asia but that none of the Domestic Monitor Program heroin retail-level purchases made in Newark were from Southwest Asia.

DEA and Customs officials informed us that the reason for a lack of 1999 Heroin Signature Program data for U.S. Pacific Coast international airports, with the exception of the Los Angeles International Airport, is because no heroin seizures at these airports met federal prosecution guidelines.

Sufficient Heroin Signature Program Data

According to DEA officials, under the Heroin Signature Program, sufficient samples are obtained from federal agencies' heroin seizures that meet the drug prosecution guidelines of the local U.S. Attorneys' Offices. Samples are obtained from all Customs, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and randomly selected DEA seizures. Prosecution guidelines for federal prosecutors are developed within the framework of the U.S. Attorney's Manual, Section 9-27, which provides the U.S. Attorney's Office great latitude. Department of Justice officials stated that each of the 93 U.S. Attorneys' Offices develops its own drug prosecution guidelines. According to Department of Justice officials, the latitude provided to U.S. Attorneys in drug prosecution guidelines can result in an individual being prosecuted for possession of an amount of heroin in one location and not prosecuted for the same amount in another.

DEA officials stated that although they do not verify compliance, they believe that federal law enforcement agencies are complying with the Heroin Signature Program requirements requiring seizures that meet federal prosecution guidelines to be turned over to DEA. According to DEA officials, the current sampling method is sufficient for the Heroin Signature Program. The Director of DEA's Special Testing and Research Laboratory stated that as with any statistical data, the more information that is used, the more useful the data is in identifying trends. He continued that, for example, analyzing additional samples from West Coast heroin seizures made by state and local authorities would broaden the statistical database used to identify

trends. DEA officials added that at this time, state and local law enforcement agencies are not required to provide samples from local seizures. However, heroin samples from state and local law enforcement agencies that are part of a federal task force might be provided if the seizures meet the federal guidelines for prosecution.

Domestic Monitor Program Commitment

According to DEA officials, DEA is committed to the Domestic Monitor Program and performs annual field division inspections, which include verification of field division compliance with Domestic Monitor Program requirements. DEA has considered expanding the program, but resource limitations are a consideration. DEA's Special Testing and Research Laboratory receives 10 samples every quarter from each of the 23 Domestic Monitor Program cities, except New York City. The New York Field Division is required to provide 20 samples every quarter. The samples obtained are from "within the metropolitan area" of each divisional city. For example, although the New York Field Division Office includes suboffices in Albany, Buffalo, Long Island, Plattsburgh, Rochester, Rockland County, Syracuse, and Westchester, New York, the Domestic Monitor Program heroin purchases are made by DEA personnel in New York City and surrounding boroughs.

The field division management makes the decision as to who makes Domestic Monitor Program purchases. While new agents, with appropriate supervision, may on occasion make such purchases, it is not standard practice and does not indicate that DEA assigns a low priority to the program.

DEA officials stated that to enhance the Domestic Monitor Program, DEA's Domestic Monitor Program Coordinators made recommendations at a conference in June 2000. Two recommendations are being adopted as pilot programs. The first recommendation is that a percentage of the Domestic Monitor Program-required heroin samples be obtained from purchases made by state and local law enforcement personnel. The second, called "geo-probe," will require that samples be obtained from purchases made in cities outside the metropolitan area of the current 23 participating cities. The additional cities within a field division will be selected based on intelligence information that heroin activity is increasing. For example, if intelligence indicates an influx of heroin into a city outside a field divisional city, the field division will make additional heroin purchases in that city as part of the Domestic Monitor Program.

As arranged with your office, unless you disclose its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this letter until 30 days after its issuance. At that time, we will send copies of the letter to interested congressional committees. The letter will also

be available at GAO's home page, www.gao.gov. If you have any questions, please call Patrick Sullivan at (202) 512-6722. Thomas Wiley, Woodrow Hunt, and Barry Shillito made key contributions to this work and letter.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert H. Hast". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Robert H. Hast
Managing Director
Office of Special Investigations

**Heroin Signature Program
Airport Seizure Samples: 1999**

Airport	Percent from Southeast Asia	Percent from Southwest Asia	Percent from Mexico	Percent from South America	Percent from unknown locale	Total seizures	Percent of total airport seizures
Anchorage	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1	0.2
Atlanta	20.0	20.0	0.0	40.0	20.0	5	1.2
Baltimore	0.0	50.0	0.0	50.0	0.0	2	0.5
Boston	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2	0.5
Chicago	43.8	12.5	6.3	37.5	0.0	16	3.9
Cincinnati	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1	0.2
Dallas	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	8	1.9
Detroit	50.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	50.0	4	1.0
Los Angeles	0.0	0.0	42.9	57.1	0.0	7	1.7
Louisville	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2	0.5
Miami	0.0	0.0	0.0	92.2	7.8	128	30.8
New York	23.1	14.8	0.0	49.7	12.4	169	40.7
Newark	7.9	10.5	0.0	73.7	7.9	38	9.2
Orlando	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	2	0.5
Philadelphia	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	2	0.5
Puerto Rico	0.0	15.4	0.0	76.9	7.7	13	3.1
St. Louis	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	1	0.2
Washington, D.C.	20.0	70.0	0.0	10.0	0.0	10	2.4
Unknown airport	0.0	25.0	0.0	75.0	0.0	4	1.0
Total	13.7	11.1	1.2	64.8	9.2	415	100.0

Note: Percents are based on the number of samples analyzed in 1999 by the Special Testing and Research Laboratory. The percents do not take into account the weight of each seizure, which can vary significantly.

Source: Data provided by the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Domestic Monitor Program: 1999

City ^a	Percent from SE Asia	Percent from SW Asia	Percent from Mexico	Percent from South America	Percent from unknown locale	Percent of seized heroin too little to measure	Total seizures	Percent of total seizures
Atlanta	29.0	3.2	3.2	29.0	12.9	22.6	31	3.9
Baltimore	5.1	0.0	0.0	84.6	7.7	2.6	39	4.9
Boston	0.0	0.0	0.0	62.2	2.7	35.1	37	4.6
Chicago	20.6	5.9	0.0	29.4	14.7	29.4	34	4.3
Dallas	0.0	0.0	76.9	0.0	23.1	0.0	26	3.3
Denver	0.0	0.0	86.4	0.0	13.6	0.0	22	2.8
Detroit	20.6	2.9	0.0	52.9	8.8	14.7	34	4.3
Houston	0.0	0.0	83.7	4.7	4.7	7.0	43	5.4
Los Angeles	0.0	0.0	68.8	0.0	21.9	9.4	32	4.0
Miami	0.0	0.0	13.6	47.7	13.6	25.0	44	5.5
New Orleans	3.6	0.0	0.0	53.6	10.7	32.1	28	3.5
New York	1.6	1.6	0.0	80.6	8.1	8.1	62	7.8
Newark	1.9	0.0	0.0	82.7	5.8	9.6	52	6.6
Orlando	0.0	0.0	0.0	78.3	8.7	13.0	23	2.9
Philadelphia	0.0	2.4	0.0	85.4	12.2	0.0	41	5.1
Phoenix	0.0	0.0	95.1	0.0	4.9	0.0	41	5.1
Puerto Rico	4.0	0.0	0.0	80.0	12.0	4.0	25	3.1
San Diego	0.0	0.0	87.1	0.0	6.5	6.5	31	3.9
San Francisco	0.0	0.0	88.2	0.0	2.9	8.8	34	4.3
Seattle	0.0	0.0	94.7	0.0	0.0	5.3	38	4.8
St. Louis	0.0	0.0	81.8	0.0	6.8	11.4	44	5.5
Washington, D.C.	22.2	5.6	0.0	52.8	2.8	16.7	36	4.6
Total	4.9	1.0	35.4	37.4	9.3	11.9	797	100.0^b

^aEl Paso, TX, became a field division during 1999 and consequently did not have complete 1999 seizure data.

^bPercent totals have been rounded to 100 percent.

Note: Percents are based on the number of Domestic Monitor Program samples analyzed in 1999 by the Special Testing and Research Laboratory.

Source: Data provided by the Drug Enforcement Administration.

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