

In 2014, I, Stacy Zinn, was a new DEA Group Supervisor for the Eastern District of Montana's Tactical Diversion Group. My job was to oversee the teams that were developing investigations targeting those that were diverting prescription pills like Oxycontin and other opioids. A single 30 mg of Oxy pill would cost approximately \$35.00 on the streets of Billings, Montana but you could sell that same pill for approximately \$67.00 on the Rocky Boy Reservation and \$89.00 on the Ft. Peck reservation. The pill prices were extremely profitable for nefarious drug organizations and this caught the attention of the Mexican Cartels. While the cartels had a reputation of exploiting the Native American communities with meth sales, it wasn't until the explosion of fentanyl that the cartels became overt.

Rumors of the Sinaloa Cartel distributing illegal drugs on Crow and Northern Cheyenne reservations have always surfaced, and while there were some evidences of this being the case, investigators were unable to put together a prosecutorial case. Fast forward to 2019, the Sinaloa Cartel was making their move from the southwestern portion of the state, Butte, Montana, across to the Ft. Peck Reservation, which is located in the northeastern portion of Montana. Ultimately, the multi-agency investigation resulted in the seizure of 65 pounds of meth, more than 2,000 counterfeit OxyContin pills laced with fentanyl and 3 pounds of heroin. The agents also confiscated more than \$32,000 in cash and 19 firearms. Post arrest statements indicated that the Sinaloa Cartel was expanded into the reservation.

In 2022, rumors of cartel presence were taking place on the Crow Reservation. Once it was learned that the cartel, believed to have been Jalisco New Generation Cartel or CJNG, was physically moving onto the Crow Reservation, I directed my Billings team to hyper focus on this investigation. DEA, along with FBI and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), teamed up and started a long-term investigation. The investigation centered on the Crow Indian Reservation, where cartel associates took over at least two properties and used them to distribute meth to people on the reservation as well as the nearby Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, Ft. Belnap Reservation, Rocky Boy Reservation, Flathead Reservation and in the town of Billings. This cartel was based in Washington state near a separate reservation. The New York Times later wrote in their Montana cartel expose, "A second federal drug case in Montana has led to charges against more than two dozen people and includes allegations of Mexican cartel members using Native Americans as pawns in the operation." This investigation is still being adjudicated and current public information is limited in order for the last of the defendants to have a fair trial.

While the above investigation has left a temporary cartel void in the reservations, a lot of intelligence was learned. The cartels will not want to give up territory where they can have such control. The price mark up of drugs being purchased in Montana is tripled compare to larger cities located in the surrounding states. This is a huge attraction to those that are manufacturing and selling the drugs, mainly, the Mexican Cartels. Due to the lack of law enforcement at both the local and federal levels, the Mexican Cartel is taking full advantage. Members of the cartel will prey on the Native Community by giving small amounts of drugs for free or have the individuals start selling for the cartels in order to get a payout in drugs. However, time and again, we see that the natives will start using the drugs they are supposed to be selling which leads to them getting into debt with the cartels. At this point, the cartels have muscled their way into the collective group and monies are now owed. A vicious cycle occurs and eventually the

individuals are so far into debt, that they do not know how to get up from underneath the cartels. The cycle is only broken when that seller is arrested by law enforcement or is killed.

So why do we have this problem in Montana? A lack of law enforcement at both the local and federal level has created a vacuum. Montana local law enforcement, to include the Montana Criminal Division of Investigations, do not have the authorities to conduct law enforcement activities on the reservation without a signed MOU with the tribe. These MOUs have become rare. Tribal police, while currently on most of the reservations, are lacking in man-power, investigative tools and sometimes are compromised. Federal agencies such as the DEA and FBI are limited in their resources. A four-man enforcement drug team for the Eastern District of Montana is beyond unbelievable especially when they have to cover Gallatin County (Bozeman) who is known for their cartel activities and Yellowstone County (Billings) where cartels and gang members are establishing territories. The FBI have their hands tied up with both assault investigations and their numbers of agents are limited too. The BIA has its own issues: lack of man power to cover the reservations, hiring issues and the inability to keeping drug agents in employed in certain reservations due to the harsh working conditions. Before COVID, a review was conducted by representatives from DOJ pertaining to the lack of law enforcement presence on the reservations and the need for more BIA representation. It was at these meetings where it was openly discussed that the cartel presence would only get worst if actions were not taken. Unfortunately, with all of these above issues combined, the Mexican Cartel has taken full advantage of the U.S. A's inability to man the reservations and the surrounding areas. At some point, we need to take the cartel presence seriously. Whether it is the reservations, Bozeman, Butte, Billings or Great Falls, the need for change is real. We cannot continue to be idle and sit on our hands.