

Lawrence man arrested in Andover held on high bail

By Jill Harmacinski jharmacinski@eagletribune.com Oct 15, 2015



PAUL BILODEAU/Staff photo. Jose Casellas of Lawrence during his arraignment on drug and weapon charges in Salem Superior Court.



A Lawrence man arrested in Andover and accused of being a major trafficker of the deadly drugs heroin and fentanyl will remain held on \$1 million bail.

Jose Casellas, 37, of 109 Haverhill St., was arrested as part of a major narcotics investigation early this summer that police said took several million dollars worth of the illegal drugs off local streets.

A main target of the investigation, which involved local, state and federal authorities, Casellas has been held on high bail since his arraignment in Lawrence District Court in June.

Last month, he was indicted by the Essex County grand jury, triggering his arraignment in Salem Superior Court last Wednesday. If convicted, the penalties he faces at the superior court level will be more severe.

Casellas is charged with trafficking more than 200 grams of heroin, illegal possession of fentanyl (a high-powered synthetic opioid painkiller), three counts of unlawful possession of a firearm and illegal possession of a firearm with an obliterated serial number.

Attorney General Maura Healey's office is prosecuting Casellas. In court Wednesday, Assistant Attorney General Megan Williams asked Judge John Lu to set bail at \$1 million for Casellas. Casella's defense attorney, Murat Erkan, did not dispute the bail amount.

In June, police began an investigation into an alleged drug trafficking operation in the Lawrence area that they believed was responsible for distributing heroin to Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

Authorities arrested Casellas in Andover and a search warrant was executed at a home on Woodland Street in Lawrence, where police said Casellas ran his operation.

Authorities seized approximately 1 kilogram each of heroin and fentanyl, more than 11 kilograms of cutting agent, three guns, drug presses, digital scales, and other packaging and distribution materials at the residence.

Healey previously described Casellas as a significant trafficker of both heroin and fentanyl, "putting dangerous drugs out on the streets and into the hands of those struggling with addiction."

Heroin addiction and related overdose deaths are considered to be at an epidemic level in both the Merrimack Valley and Southern New Hampshire.

Authorities have said dealers combine heroin with fentanyl to keep up with the high demand for more powerful batches of heroin.

In Essex County already this year, 124 people have died of suspected heroin or opiate overdoses, according to records kept by District Attorney Jonathan Blodgett's office.

Healey is working with legislators to make trafficking fentanyl a similar crime to trafficking heroin. On Wednesday, the state House of Representatives approved a bill making trafficking fentanyl a crime punishable by up to 20 years in prison.

"We will continue to work with our law enforcement partners to tackle the heroin and prescription drug epidemic from all angles, including getting these lethal drugs off of our streets and out of the hands of those struggling with addiction, " she said in a statement.

Heroin trafficking carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison.

The narcotics investigation that led to Casellas' arrest involved Healey's office, state police, federal agents from the Drug Enforcement Administration and Lawrence, Andover and Methuen police.

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