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Alaska National Guard

*Department of Military
and Veterans Affairs*

Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska

STATE OF ALASKA

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

019-083

August 21, 2019

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Texas Joint Counterdrug Task Force

National Guard Counterdrug Program celebrates 30 years, historical milestones

AUSTIN, Texas — The National Guard Counterdrug Program celebrates 30 years of support to more than 300 federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial law enforcement agencies across all 54 states and territories, this year.

The program's history is marked by parks that are built in the place of demolished drug houses, record multi-billion dollar drug seizures, positively impacted at-risk youth, and has enhanced law enforcement agency's capabilities to combat illicit drug activities.

"The National Guard Counterdrug Program was one of the most brilliant acts our U.S. Congress established 30 years ago," Col. Miguel Torres, Texas National Guard Joint Counterdrug Coordinator said. "This program allows the Citizen-Soldier to support law enforcement agencies down to our communities, making it a solid grassroots initiative."

The support that Guardsmen provide to agencies include analysis support, communications, engineer support, diver support, transportation, training, reconnaissance, civil operations and linguist services.

"Cartels and drugs do not discriminate and show no mercy," said Torres. "The Counterdrug program adds a layer of support and hope to our communities, our great state of Texas and our national security."

According to the Department of Defense Inspector General's 2017 Auditors Report, National Guard criminal analysts produced more than 175,000 analytical products in support of 20,000 U.S. law enforcement agency counterdrug investigations.

Additionally, in 2017, National Guard support directly contributed to disruption or dismantlement of more than 1,000 priority targets linked to drug trafficking organizations and the dismantlement of five high-value money laundering targets in excess of \$5 million.

Arthur Doty, a Drug Enforcement Administration senior executive from Washington D.C., spoke about the National Guard's support to law enforcement during the Texas National Guard Joint Counterdrug program's 30th anniversary recognition ceremony.

"Terrible people do terrible things, but in order to get them into the court room you have to synthesize this," said Doty pointing to a photo of multiple stacks of case evidence in a presentation. "And don't

forget the electronic version. The only way we are going to do that is with the relationship with the Guard and law enforcement.

“You take the best and brightest in the National Guard and combine them with our law enforcement analysts and case agents, and synthesize that into something a courtroom, an Assistant U.S. Attorney, and a jury will understand.”

The National Guard began providing support to law enforcement agencies in 1977 when the Hawaii National Guard used helicopters and personnel for illicit domestic marijuana grow field eradication operations.

In 1985, shortly after President Ronald Reagan declared a “War on Drugs”, the Texas, New Mexico, Florida and California National Guard were the first states to conduct counter-narcotics support missions with law enforcement.

The Counterdrug program was established by congressional legislation in 1989, with a mission to leverage unique military capabilities, national resources, and community focus in the nation's response to drugs and associated security threats as the need for a national program grew.

“The 30 year celebration speaks to the effectiveness of the program and its efforts,” said Jim Levine, a former Texas National Guard Counterdrug Task Force member. “The Counterdrug program is a force multiplier, so that law enforcement agencies don’t have to dedicate employees to case support.

“Guardsmen can help do the nuts and bolts of things and allowing law enforcement agencies to put people behind bars.”

With the rise of overdoses from opioids, synthetic drugs and the national security threat by drug trafficking organizations, the significance of the program and its contributions are pertinent to the nation's response to drug and associated transnational security threats.

“I love the fact this is the 30th anniversary and we are proud of that history,” said Doty. “The relationship between the Guard and our law enforcement has to grow. This is our community, our state, our country and we become all the stronger when we work together.”

Since 2011, the national program has assisted law enforcement agencies in seizing \$103.7 billion of drugs, 337,000 weapons and the denial of \$109 billion of illicit revenue.

Each program has a different challenge since the drug threat varies from state to state.

According to Maj. Ernesto Gutierrez, a senior analyst for the Florida National Guard Counterdrug program, 40 percent of all Latin American goods are shipped commercially to the state of Florida.

“Our biggest challenge is that because we are a diverse culture and have a high volume of tourists, we tend to get the strangest types of synthetic drugs,” said Gutierrez. “The drug will pop up then when we get it under control, it goes away. It is an extensive problem because the drug trafficking organizations are changing the formula for selling every month.”

Guard collaboration among law enforcement agencies is vital to combating the transshipment of drugs, money laundering and domestic trafficking issues that the nation faces.

“Everyone is working toward a common goal,” said Gutierrez. “When working with us, agencies are not worried about us taking credit and they feel open to share information with us. This facilitates investigations and the exchange of information across the state. Across the state, we have partnerships and trust.”

In Florida, the program led to enhanced interagency relationships and changes in legislation.

“The Counterdrug program in our state has assisted federal and state agencies in working together and finding venues in state and federal law to go after these drug trafficking organizations,” said Lt. Col. Jaime Umberger, the Florida National Guard Counterdrug Coordinator.

“In the last few years we have been able to assist with research and providing statistics that allows our state and attorney general to change laws.”

California also shares the challenge of transshipment and illegal activity in regards to its marijuana legislation.

“California is a narco state that experiences massive flows of illicit narcotics from across our southern border for future distribution both inside the state and across state lines,” said Col. Robert Paoletti, California National Guard Counterdrug Coordinator.

“California also produces mass amounts of illegal marijuana that is illegally shipped nation-wide. Interdicting these drugs here in California prior to distribution stops the cash flow from these illegal substances, cripples the drug trafficking organizations and eases the negative effects on the entire nation.”

Last year, the California National Guard Counterdrug Task Force analysts embedded in law enforcement agencies throughout the state supported 2,229 cases, which led to the disruption of 446 drug trafficking cases and the dismantlement of 62 drug trafficking organizations.

In addition, the California National Guard Counterdrug program aided law enforcement in the seizure of \$2.2 billion of illegal drugs, weapons, property and currency.

Among the many pounds of methamphetamine, heroin, illegal marijuana and cocaine seized, the California Counterdrug program, among other states, assisted in the seizure of fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid analgesic that is similar to morphine, but is 50 to 100 times more potent.

“Our program supported law enforcement agencies in the seizure of 91 pounds of fentanyl with a street value of \$25 million,” said Paoletti, a former law enforcement officer.

“For reference, 91 pounds of fentanyl is enough to kill 13 million people.”

While the program experienced a wide-range of successes supporting agencies, Paoletti noted that removing the supply of illicit narcotics is important, but it must be coupled with an effort to reduce the demand for the drugs.

“Counterdrug working with local law enforcement as well as our schools to provide positive role models for youth has the potential to provide lasting impacts that simply removing the product from the streets does not do,” Paoletti said.

“After 25 years in law enforcement, I have seen the deleterious effects of drugs in our communities. The

assistance we provide to local task forces has a great impact on reducing the supply of illicit drugs which are destroying lives for the profit of others.”

Since the early 1990s, Counterdrug programs across the nation have participated in drug demand reduction programs, such as the Red Ribbon campaign, Drug Education for Youth and Stay on Track.

“In my opinion, it is the worst epidemic problem that we have in our country when 70,000 U.S. citizens die from drug-related overdoses in a year,” said Maj. Gen. Patrick Hamilton, the 36th Infantry Division commander, Texas Army National Guard.

Hamilton, previously presided over the Texas National Guard Counterdrug program when he served as the Texas Domestic Operations Task Force commander.

“One thing about the Guard is that we are a community-based organization, at the grassroots---it’s how we were built,” Hamilton said.

As of April 2010, the program had implemented drug demand reduction programs in 1,000 middle and junior high school, boys and girls clubs, and after-school programs, providing 400,000 students with an awareness of risks related to the abuse of drugs.

Today, the national program now impacts communities and works to reduce the demand of illicit drugs through the civil operations program. The role of a civil operator is to coach, train, facilitate, coordinate, lead and support coalitions and community-based organizations to make community change.

Penny Rogers, founder of the community-based organization, Face the Facts, a drug addiction awareness and prevention organization, said that the Delaware National Guard’s Counterdrug program made a huge difference in getting the resources she needed.

“The Delaware National Guard Counterdrug Program directed us to programs and information that we were not aware of and didn’t know existed,” said Rogers.

“Sgt. Brandi Neihof, the civil operations Soldier, was an invaluable resource and diligently worked with us to provide materials and resources that would assist our program.”

Counterdrug programs in Texas, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Virginia have been transforming their communities by providing engineer support to directly combat the drug use problem at its roots.

The Counterdrug engineers assist municipalities in reclaiming control of known drug trafficking areas by working with affected communities to knock down structures that are proven drug trafficking locations. This activity helps rid neighborhoods of gangs, drugs, and associated violent activity and allows for community revitalization.

“I’ve seen it first hand, a crack house getting knocked down in a neighborhood and hours later watching kids play soccer on an empty lot that was a crack house 24 hours before with people dealing and using drugs,” said Hamilton.

“That is getting after what the problem is in communities. That folks, is why we have a Counterdrug program and why it needs to continue to be successful.”

Since the beginning of the Texas engineer program, known as Operation Crackdown, in 1993, Texas has demolished roughly 1,600 structures. "Operation Crackdown has been of great benefit to Laredo," said Laredo Mayor, Pete Saenz. "The Texas National Guard has helped us remove the potential for gangs, drugs and other illegal activity in our inner city neighborhoods and for that we are extremely grateful."

With 1,254 miles of border with Mexico, 367 miles of coastline, 29 recognized ports of entry, countless border crossings, 80,000 miles of public highways, 14,000 miles of railroads, and 1,900 sea and air ports, Texas has a large area for major drug trafficking organizations to operate, making a cohesive partnership between law enforcement and the National Guard all the more significant.

"The Joint Counterdrug Task Force has a long contributing history working with the Drug Enforcement Administration Houston Field Division," said Sammy Parks, Houston DEA Public Information Officer. "The Counterdrug Task Force is nonetheless instrumental in the vital work conducted by the DEA and we rely heavily on the continued support and assistance of the task force."

"The DEA will continue to partner with the task force to seek out, and ultimately wipe out, and destroy drug trafficking organizations who are negatively impacting our communities."

Over the last 30 years, the Counterdrug program has supplemented their support to law enforcement agencies with military training skills and environments.

The program has five Counterdrug training centers that support federal, state and local law enforcement officials, providing training in military-unique skills that law enforcement organizations are unable to easily replicate or support organically.

Since 1993, the Multijurisdictional Counterdrug Task Force Training program, based in Florida, has trained six million students.

In 2017 alone, the five Counterdrug training centers spread throughout the country, conducted more than 1,000 iterations of 180 drug interdiction courses, training nearly 35,000 students from across the Department of Defense, domestic and foreign law enforcement agencies and community-based organizations.

"State Governors, U.S. Senators and Representatives, and law enforcement organizations coast-to coast have recognized the value of this training," said Robert Charles, former Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

"This training creates a ripple effect, enabling personnel to maximize their impact in their home states or within their respective agencies."

As the program progresses forward, current and former program members reflect on the positive impact that it's had on the nation.

"The training provided by the National Guard Counterdrug Program to law enforcement personnel has proved to be invaluable," said retired Col. John Mosbey, former director of the National Guard Counterdrug Program.

"Some amazing innovations have come about in the Nation's Counterdrug Program because the Guard has been so seriously involved. Techniques in aviation that can be applied to counter-terrorism and other Homeland Security missions were pioneered in the Guard's Army and Air Counterdrug programs."

With the opioid epidemic at large, communities in disparity and the future of the nation’s security on the line, Counterdrug Guardsmen continue to answer the call to duty.

“Thirty years of support is important because it demonstrates the incredible tenacity and consistency of the National Guard,” said Mosbey. “The Nation called and the Guard is still on the job protecting our communities.”

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The Alaska Counterdrug Support Program is a taskforce of the adjutant general and has contributed to the statewide counterdrug effort mission since the early 1990s, with the exception of 2013-2015. The 10-12 employed Air and Army Guardsmen apply a two-pronged approach of interdiction and prevention to support a comprehensive community response to local drug problems in a locally relevant way.

PHOTOS

1. **DVIDS link** includes story and selected full-resolution photos. (Primarily for media, DVIDS is accessible from .mil computers.). (Primarily for media, DVIDS is accessible from .mil computers.)

<https://www.dvidshub.net/news/336627/national-guard-counterdrug-program-celebrates-30-years-historical-milestones>



Members of the Alaska National Guard Counterdrug Support Program pose for a picture after assisting with the Anchorage Cops for Community Clothesline Project by sorting, folding and hanging clothes on July 31, 2019. (U.S. Army National Guard courtesy photo)



Guardsmen with the Alaska National Guard Counterdrug Support Program participate in Red Ribbon Week in Wasilla with a drug free celebration at Iditarod Elementary School, October 26, 2018. The event brought multiple law enforcement agencies together to promote a healthy and drug-free lifestyle by greeting students upon arrival at school, static displays of military and police vehicles, and a drug free message. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Balinda O’Neal Dresel)