Michigan Child Sex Sting Operation Catches 22 Suspects

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Twenty-two individuals were apprehended during a major sex crimes and human trafficking sting in Genesee County, Michigan. ***Genesee County, Michigan Sheriff's Department***

Twenty-two individuals have been charged with sex crimes and human trafficking resulting from a major Genesee County, Michigan undercover child sex sting. The operation netted 20 men attempting to solicit sex with underage children and one woman who tried to sell her six-year-old daughter for sex. One male suspect remains at large. The list of those charged includes a former U.S. Senate candidate, a prominent bank vice president, a wealth management advisor, and a credit union manager. The five-week-long investigation started on April 11 and ended on May 15.

The suspects were charged with Child Sexual Abusive Activity, Accosting for Immoral Purposes and Communicating with Another to Commit a Crime on the Internet. Each charge carries a sentence of up to 20 years. Other charges including child pornography and human trafficking are pending. The arrests resulted in 66 felony charges and will total 994 combined years of potential prison time if all of the suspects are convicted.

The Suspects Were Apprehended by a Newly-Formed Police Task Force

During a June 10 morning press conference, Genesee County Sheriff Robert Pickell stated that the sting was conducted by the newly formed Genesee Human Oppression Strike Team (G.H.O.S.T.). Pickell revealed that undercover officers apprehended the suspects by placing an ad on the dark web, then posing as 14-year-old boys and 14-year-old girls who were offering to meet the suspects at local hotels throughout the county. “It’s like fish coming to the bait,” he said.

The G.H.O.S.T. team received guidance from members of law enforcement in Mesa, Arizona, which has a staff of 20 assigned to investigate human trafficking. “We learned how to infiltrate, we learned how to talk the language, we learned the language to get involved with (sexual predators),” Pickell stated.

Suspects Were Located on the Dark Web

Pickell commented that suspects were enticed with text messages supposedly coming from teens “looking to party” and that texting was “going back and forth,” right up until the suspects walked into the hotel room. “We’re in really the dark web. We’re down there in the belly of the beast.”

Pickell emphasized that he was not just looking to make arrests but also to protect children. “(The suspects) are believed to have been targeting children in Genesee County for sexual purposes. While some of the suspects live in Genesee County, others traveled from Saginaw, Shiawassee, Oakland, Wayne, Lapeer, and Tuscola Counties,” Genesee County Sheriff Robert Pickell said in a post on Facebook. Genesee is the fifth-largest county in Michigan and Flint is its largest city.

The Suspects Come From All Walks of Life

“(The offenders) are of all ages, creeds, genders and professions, with one goal in mind - to have sex with kids,” Pickell said. Some of the most prominent included George Huffman III, 42, a truck driver who ran as a US Taxpayers Party candidate for the Michigan State Senate in 2010, the Michigan State House in 2012, and the U.S. Senate in 2018.

Carl Spradlin, 59, a Comerica Bank senior vice president in charge of compliance risk management was also captured. Spradlin is also a committee member with the Michigan Bankers Association and the American Bankers Association.

McDonald’s employee Jennifer Beckman, 37, was the sole woman on the list of suspects and is accused of attempting to sell her daughter for sex to another individual who was also arrested in the sting. “She provided her 6-year-old daughter for Michael Foster to have sex with; trafficked her 6-year-old daughter,” Pickell said. “And upon further investigation, we found that Michael Foster was having sex with his 2-year-old daughter. It doesn’t get any worse than that.”

Charles Haller, 45, is a well-known credit manager. His LinkedIn page shows he also served for nine years as a youth sports coach. Pickell said that since Haller had to be at work by 8:30 a.m., he wanted to meet for sex at 7 a.m. before he went to work. “He couldn’t get away at night so he wanted to do it in the morning,” Pickell said.

John Barrow, 71, was the oldest suspect caught in the sting and is a prominent wealth management advisor. Michael Robbins was already on the sex offender registry and Shane Legendere was found with child porn.

Several of the individuals were carrying items including knives, guns, handcuffs, methamphetamine, crack cocaine, marijuana, and alcohol. Approximately $3,000 in cash was also confiscated. “When you see all these weapons that people bring to have sex with a child and they say, ‘Well, I bought it for my protection.’ Protect them from a young boy, a young girl?” Pickell said.

Genesee County Plans on Continuing These Operations

Describing these operations as “ugly, ugly work,” the sheriff stated that this was not a one-time operation, explaining that he has sufficient funding to continue similar operations through the end of the year.

He is also looking at getting state and federal grants to continue these types of investigations.

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