

Puerto Rican man living in Massachusetts pleads guilty in wide-ranging Fentanyl, Heroin, Cocaine conspiracy

A Puerto Rican man pleaded guilty today in federal court in Worcester to his role in a wide-ranging fentanyl, heroin, crack and cocaine trafficking conspiracy.

Rafael Hidalgo Rodriguez, 33, of Ponce, P.R., pleaded guilty to conspiracy to distribute and to possess with intent to distribute 280 grams or more of cocaine base and 500 grams or more of cocaine. U.S. District Court Judge Timothy S. Hillman scheduled sentencing for March 21, 2022. Rodriguez was charged in an eight-count superseding indictment along with 17 others in July 2020.

According to court documents, following a fatal fentanyl overdose in September 2018, law enforcement began an investigation into a drug trafficking organization (DTO) in the Fitchburg area led by co-conspirators Pedro Baez and Anthony Baez. Through court-authorized interceptions of phones used by the DTO and its suppliers, agents were able to identify the individuals who supplied Pedro and Anthony Baez with cocaine, heroin and fentanyl.

Over the course of the investigation, agents seized over 1.8 kilograms of a heroin and fentanyl mixture, over 3.6 kilograms of cocaine and over 50 grams of crack cocaine, as well as a stolen, loaded handgun, drug manufacturing equipment and over \$376,000. Rodriguez distributed between three and five kilograms of cocaine.

Rodriguez is the ninth defendant to plead guilty in this case. In December 2020, Anthony Baez was sentenced by Judge Hillman

to 13 years in prison and five years of supervised release. Pedro Baez pleaded guilty on Feb. 2, 2021 and is scheduled to be sentenced on May 17, 2022.

The charge of conspiracy to distribute 280 grams or more of cocaine base and 500 grams or more of cocaine provides for a sentence of up to life in prison, at least four years and up to a lifetime of supervised release and a fine of up to \$10 million. Sentences are imposed by a federal district court judge based upon the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

Acting United States Attorney Nathaniel R. Mendell; Joseph R. Bonavolonta, Special Agent in Charge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Boston Division; Commissioner Carol Mici of the Massachusetts Department of Correction; and Colonel Christopher Mason, Superintendent of the Massachusetts State Police made the announcement today. Valuable assistance was provided by the Fitchburg and Lunenburg Police Departments; the U.S. Postal Inspection Service; and the Massachusetts State Police. Assistant U.S. Attorney Alatheia Porter of Mendell's Narcotics and Money Laundering Unit is prosecuting the case.

The operation was conducted is part of an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) Strike Force Initiative, which provides for the establishment of permanent multi-agency task force teams that work side-by-side in the same location. This co-located model enables agents from different agencies to collaborate on intelligence-driven, multi-jurisdictional operations to disrupt and dismantle the most significant drug traffickers, money launderers, gangs, and transnational criminal organizations. More information on the OCDETF program is available here: <https://www.justice.gov/ocdetf/about-ocdetf>.

The details contained in the court documents are allegations. The remaining defendants are presumed innocent unless and

until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.