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Major drugs trove seized

Two arrested, more could follow

By Sheila McLaughlin The Cincinnati Enquirer

LEBANON - Paul David Lawwill II told people he owned a lawn mowing business outside Dayton, Ohio.

But police in a five-county area say the 32-year-old Moraine man was one of the region's biggest drug dealers.

They say he's the kingpin in an operation that moved millions of dollars in marijuana, cocaine, crystal methamphetamine, ecstasy and prescription pills from Mexico and the Southwest to a house in rural Harlan Township, where it was divvied out to dealers.

Lawwill, and an alleged accomplice - Kenneth Ridenour, 30, of Franklin - so far are the only arrests in a two-year investigation that intercepted \$3.6 million in street drugs and \$685,000 in cash since last week.

The men are jailed on federal drug conspiracy charges, and authorities expect others to be indicted.

FBI officials say the bust removed a significant amount of dangerous drugs headed for communities in southern Ohio.

John Burke, commander of the Warren-Clinton Drug Task Force, described Lawwill as Warren County's largest drug dealer.

"These people were servicing a lot, a lot of folks. They had their own sellers and everything filters down to users," Burke said. "This is major drug dealing."

Lawwill was arrested Jan. 22 when he fled from a vacant house owned by his father on Morrow-Woodville Road. Police said he used the house to store drugs for sale. Police were watching the house on five acres at the time, Burke said. When uniformed officers pulled Lawwill over, they found \$585,000 in cash, 11 pounds of crystal methamphetamine, 2.89 pounds of powdered ecstasy and thousands of tablets of Xanax, methadone and oxycodone in his car.

In addition, 25 kilos of cocaine were confiscated Wednesday at a storage locker in Dayton, Ohio, which Burke said was linked to Lawwill's operation. About 718 pounds of marijuana were seized between the Harlan Township house and another residence in Middletown.

Burke said that the investigation started as a small undercover purchase of cocaine in Springboro two years ago, but soon developed into an investigation that required help from the FBI, state agents and nine other local agencies.

"In the first six to eight months, we saw how big it was getting. In the last six months, it has doubled in size from what we thought it was," Burke said.

He said most of the people involved in the ring were local residents who had developed a source for the drugs in the Southwest United States. Authorities were still searching for that source, who is believed to have fled to Mexico, Burke said.