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Fugitive Recovery Unit Endeavor Captures 59 Felons

By Vanessa St. Gerard

During a five-month sweep by the Idaho Department of Correction Fugitive Recovery Unit, 59 wanted felons were located and arrested under the leadership of Ron Mesler and a program called Operation Talon. The program cross-matched outstanding arrest warrants with food stamp recipients to capture offenders who not only were evading arrest, but illegally collecting welfare benefits as well.

Operation Talon is an initiative of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General in which funding is provided to selected agencies to execute the program. While Mesler, one of the founding investigators of the Fugitive Recovery Unit, researched cutting-edge techniques to recapturing fugitives, he learned about Operation Talon and sought to bring it to the Idaho DOC. "They provide the backbone of the program," Mesler explained. "They make the money available for the equipment and overtime." After phone calls to the USDA and other local agencies, Mesler was able to acquire the \$10,000 grant.

Mesler secured partnerships with the Ada County and Canyon County sheriff's offices and the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, which would all compare their records to

determine which fugitives were taking illegal advantage of state money. In the food stamp program, it is illegal for fleeing felons to apply for and receive food stamp benefits. "We were the lead agency," Mesler said. "We reached out to the two counties and they were enthusiastic." However, there was a great deal of work that needed to be done before the operation took off in May 2003. Mesler says that nearly a year's worth of preparation was done prior to the official launching of Operation Talon.

Once the sheriff's offices produced their list of names, comprised mostly of probation violators, Department of Health and Welfare staff were responsible for comparing the offenders' names with those receiving food stamps using a software program they had developed. "This never, ever could have happened without their participation," Mesler said. "Health and Welfare was a true partner. ... They did a great job."

When the final list of 100 was generated, the DOC worked with the sheriff's offices to prioritize the offenders based on their criminal history and propensity for violence, said Mesler, who spent six years as a probation and parole officer before joining the Fugitive Recovery Unit. Toward the beginning of 2003, Mesler and his team began testing the system. "When we got a couple hot ones, we made early apprehensions before the program officially began," the 10-year corrections veteran said.

Operation Talon ran from May to September 2003. The result ended with 59 apprehensions statewide and nine people removed from illegally receiving food stamps. "It far exceeded my expectations," Mesler said. The information they received "turned out to be really good leads." The offenders' crime histories ran the gamut from writing bad checks and burglaries to child abandonment and aggra-

vated assault. Although the offenders were wanted by sheriff's offices located in southwest Idaho, the operation was a statewide effort since other city and county agencies got involved when offenders were found outside the jurisdiction the operation focused on, Mesler explained. Of the remaining offenders on the original list, many were located outside of Idaho, and could not be extradited. "Even though we weren't able to apprehend everyone, at least the USDA was able to cut off the benefits they were illegally collecting," said Mesler.

As a result of Mesler's work, both with Operation Talon and as a dedicated member of the Fugitive Recovery Unit, he recently was promoted to section supervisor. "Ron is an established leader within the Idaho Department of Correction. During his years of service ... he has been an innovator," said Greg Lewis, Mesler's district manager. "He understands our role as a public servant and as an agent to protect our community. He has backed it up in his career with his innovation and sound judgement."

Through Mesler's vision, the DOC was able to capture offenders who otherwise most likely still would be evading arrest. In addition, the partnerships formed during the operation between the various agencies have been solidified, and the DOC plans to continue working with the Department of Health and Welfare to pursue other offenders. "There wouldn't have been an Operation Talon without Ron Mesler's efforts," Lewis said. "There were a lot of people who made it possible once Ron started it rolling, but he was the driver in the process."

Vanessa St. Gerard is associate editor of Corrections Today.

