

Dark Web Fentanyl Trafficker Known as 'The Drug Llama' is Sentenced to 13 Years in Federal Prison

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EAST ST. LOUIS - The United States District Court for the Southern District of Illinois announced today that Melissa Scanlan (a/k/a “The Drug Llama”) has been sentenced to 160 months in federal prison for trafficking fentanyl throughout the United States via the “dark web,” engaging in an international money laundering conspiracy, and distributing fentanyl that results in death.

The crimes for which Scanlan was sentenced are as follows: one count of conspiracy to distribute fentanyl, five counts of distributing fentanyl, one count of selling counterfeit drugs, one count of misbranding drugs, one count of conspiracy to commit international

money laundering, and one count of distribution of fentanyl resulting in death. The 32-year-old San Diego native pleaded guilty to those charges in October 2019. Scanlan's co-conspirator, Brandon Arias, 34, was previously sentenced to nine years in federal prison for his role in the conspiracy.

Facts disclosed in open court revealed that Scanlan and Arias created an account on "Dream Market," a dark web¹ marketplace where users buy and sell illegal substances and services, and used that account to sell substantial quantities of narcotics while operating under the moniker, "The Drug Llama." The charged fentanyl distribution conspiracy lasted from October 2016 to August 2018, during which time Scanlan sold approximately 52,000 fentanyl pills throughout the United States.

According to court records, Scanlan and Arias made over \$100,000 from their dark web drug trafficking and split the money evenly. Court records also demonstrated Scanlan's participation in an international money laundering conspiracy with Mexican cartel members, as well as her role in aiding and abetting the distribution of fentanyl pills to a woman identified as A.W., who later died.

U.S. Attorney Steven D. Weinhoeft assailed the culture of criminality that exists on the dark web.

"Criminals like Melissa Scanlan who recklessly flood our communities with opioids may think they can evade detection in the shadowy corners and back alleys of the internet," he said. "But they will find no quarter there. Where they go, we will follow. With the collaboration of outstanding investigators at our partner agencies, we will use every tool and method available to find these people and prosecute them to the fullest extent of the law." U.S. Attorney Steven D. Weinhoeft also noted that this prosecution further underscores the critical need for Congress to permanently criminalize fentanyl analogues.

The dark web is an underground computer network that is unreachable by traditional search engines and web browsers, creating a seeming anonymity to users. This false cloak has led to a proliferation of criminal activity on dark web marketplaces, like the one used by Scanlan and Arias.

"Illicit opioid distribution, whether online or through conventional drug distribution methods, and the resulting overdoses and deaths are a continuing national crisis; those who contribute to that crisis through their illegal actions will be brought to justice," said Special Agent in Charge Charles L. Grinstead, FDA Office of Criminal Investigations Kansas City Field Office. "We are fully committed to disrupting and dismantling illegal prescription drug distribution networks that misuse the internet at the expense of public health and safety."

“With accessibility of fentanyl, it is imperative that the Drug Enforcement Administration and its law enforcement partners exploit all distribution avenues utilized by drug traffickers in Scanlan’s case,” stated DEA Special Agent in Charge William J. Callahan of the St. Louis Division. “Scanlan distributed poison in our community that resulted in death and she is now being held accountable.”

This case was part of a months-long, coordinated national operation involving the Food and Drug Administration – Office of Criminal Investigations, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the United States Postal Inspection Service, the Department of Homeland Security, United States Customs and Border Protection, the United States Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of California, and the United States Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of Illinois. Assistant U.S. Attorney Derek J. Wiseman is the prosecuting attorney on the case.