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N.J. police bust Newark opioid mill, seize 15 pounds of fentanyl

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New Jersey police said Tuesday they've shut down a Newark opioid mill, as thousands of residents continue to die from overdoses every year.

Police arrested three men and seized more than 15 pounds of fentanyl on Sunday, the state attorney general's office said. The mill was linked to more than 70 overdoses and 29 deaths.

Col. Patrick Callahan, acting superintendent of the State Police, said they saw significant decreases in area overdoses whenever they shut down a drug mill.

"We know we're saving lives," Callahan told NJ Advance Media Tuesday.

The investigation into Newark mills began in November. Dealers often stamp brand names onto the wax folds used to package drugs, authorities said, and investigators traced folds found at overdose scenes to a location on Hobson Street.

When officers searched it Sunday they found dozens of stamps labeled "Thanos" and "Thor," among others, names linked to overdoses in more than a half-dozen counties.

Three men were arrested and face nine drug and weapons charges, including possession with intent to distribute, authorities said. Dereemus Botts, 34, of Irvington, Whydia Durham, 46, of Union and Nelson Johnson, 30, of Newark are in jail ahead of a Thursday detention hearing.

"We were able to discover something which should alarm everybody," state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said Tuesday. "There was no heroin found there, it was all fentanyl."

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that can be 100 times more powerful than morphine, and it has ravaged New Jersey. Grewal said the doses seized were enough to kill hundreds of thousands of people in its pure form.

In addition to arrests — Grewal has previously said officers shut down 11 heroin mills last year and seized more than 4.5 million doses — the state is expanding treatment options, giving away naloxone, and educating student athletes about the dangers of opioids, among other efforts.

State officials have said that multi-pronged approach was why the death toll did not go up last year after years of increases. About 3,021 people died of suspected drug-related overdoses last year, according to preliminary data, a slight decrease from the year before.

The State Police's opioid task force is bolstered by a \$2.9 million federal grant, Callahan said, and works with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Grewal stressed that state and federal agencies are still able to collaborate despite being at odds in court over New Jersey's immigration policies.

Brian Michael, Special Agent in Charge with Homeland Security Investigations in Newark, said in a statement that the partnerships were crucial to tackling the fentanyl crisis.