

19 drug-related arrests made in North County

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A simultaneous execution of search warrants in Guadalupe and Santa Maria has led to the arrests of 19 people on drug-related charges, according to the Santa Barbara County District Attorney's Office.

Jorge Garcia, 32, and more than a dozen other defendants have been charged with conspiracy to distribute methamphetamine and various other charges, including child endangerment, according to a press release issued on Monday by the District Attorney's Office. Mr. Garcia is also charged with providing methamphetamine to a minor and unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor.

"This is a community-impact kind of case," said Ken Bambrick, task force commander for the Santa Barbara Regional Narcotic Enforcement Team. "We believe Mr. Garcia was a facilitator for a very large distribution ring in Guadalupe, and he was a dealer in the area."

Mr. Bambrick said authorities think Mr. Garcia used a number of minors either to distribute drugs and/or sold drugs to them.

He said another "unfortunate part of this is Mr. Garcia has been accused of having sexual intercourse with an underage female." Authorities think Mr. Garcia may have had sex with more than one underage female victim. "We speculate that Mr. Garcia introduced methamphetamine to underage victims and then had sexual intercourse with them," Mr. Bambrick said.

On Feb. 28, a judge lifted the seal order on the search warrants, which paved the way for prosecutors to release information on the case to the public, said Megan Baldwin, Deputy District Attorney, Santa Maria Division.

In June 2007, the Santa Barbara Regional Narcotic Enforcement Team, the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Santa Barbara District Attorney's Office-Santa Maria Division began a drug investigation in Guadalupe and Santa Maria involving what they are calling the Jorge Garcia drug trafficking organization, the release states. On Dec. 11, 2007, the regional narcotics team and DEA executed several search warrants in Guadalupe and Santa Maria "during a coordinated takedown of the Garcia drug trafficking organization."

The suspects were arrested on Dec. 11 and the weeks following, Ms. Baldwin said. Not all of the 19 people arrested as a result of the execution of the warrants are charged in the exact same case, she said. "Some are codefendants of (Mr. Garcia) -- others are not and have stand-alone cases," Ms. Baldwin said. "All the cases are drug-related and stem from this investigation."

Ms. Baldwin said she is not going to release the names of the other defendants who were charged. However, she said all 19 pleaded not guilty at their first arraignment. A preliminary hearing date is scheduled to be set on April 3 before Judge Edward Bullard in Dept. 6 of the Santa Barbara County Superior Court in Santa Maria. Police are asking anyone with information about the case to call Sgt. Mauricio Calderon of the Guadalupe Police Department at (805) 343-2112.