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Contact Communications

Phone (850) 245-0150

OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL STATE OF FLORIDA

Florida Attorney General's Office News Release

Attorney General James Uthmeier Announces 48 Arrests, 153 charges in Record-Breaking Undercover Child Predator Operation in Central Florida



Courtesy of the Office of Attorney General James Uthmeier

OCALA, Fla.—Attorney General James Uthmeier announced the arrest of 48 individuals, including six foreign nationals flagged with ICE detainers, following a six-day undercover operation targeting online child predators. The operation, coordinated by the Marion County Sheriff's Office, marks the highest number of arrests ever made during this annual joint effort to protect Florida children from exploitation and abuse.

"As a father, I am outraged by the heinous crimes we spoke about today. As Attorney General, I'm proud of the brave officers behind this record-breaking operation," said **Attorney General James Uthmeier**. "They came after children, but Florida and federal law enforcement were waiting for them. Thanks to the Marion County Sheriff's Office for putting this operation together

so these men were stopped before they could harm a single child."

"My office routinely conducts these types of operations. With each operation, we catch more and more. The number of offenders only goes up," said **Marion County Sheriff Billy Woods**. "Parents, we will never arrest every single one of them. You have to know what your child is doing online, and children have to know what dangers are lurking online. As a Sheriff and as a father, I understand the anger and disgust a parent has towards these types of individuals. I assure you that we will continue to attack this plague head on."

"I had the privilege of being able to see this operation firsthand, and it was nothing short of remarkable," said **State Attorney for the Fifth Judicial Circuit Bill Gladson**. "Sheriff Woods and his deputies did an outstanding job catching and removing 40 predators from the Central Florida community. A special thank you to Attorney General James Uthmeier and the Office of Statewide Prosecution for their commitment to keeping our community safe."

Attorney General Uthmeier's Office of Statewide Prosecution partnered with nine law enforcement agencies across local, state, and federal levels to identify and apprehend suspects attempting to meet children for sex or send them harmful material online.

This operation also exposed the use of Snapchat as a platform to target children. Predators used various online chat and gaming platforms, including Snapchat, in an attempt to message and meet with minors, which were actually undercover officers. The Attorney General's Office is suing Snapchat for knowingly and willingly violating Florida law, including the protections enshrined in last year's HB3 and the Florida Deceptive and Unfair Trade Practices Act. The lawsuit, filed in April, states that rather than obeying Florida law, Snapchat is actively deceiving parents about the risks associated with using the platform.

At least six apprehended individuals are on ICE detainers, and traveled from Jamaica, El Salvador, Dubai, and India to the state of Florida with the intention to prey on children.

The defendants face the following charges:

- Traveling to Meet a Minor for Illegal Sexual Conduct (34);
- Human Trafficking (5);
- Using a Computer to Solicit a Child for Sexual Conduct (48);
- Unlawful Use of a Two-Way Communications Device to Facilitate a Felony (40);
- Transmitting Material Harmful to a Minor (14);
- Traveling to Meet a Minor for Illegal Sexual Conduct Facilitated by a Guardian (1);
- Using a Computer to Solicit a Guardian for Illegal Sexual Conduct with a Child (1);
- Fleeing to Elude a Law Enforcement Officer (1);
- Resisting Arrest without Violence (2);
- Drug Charges (4);
- Drug Paraphernalia (1);
- Reckless Driving (1); and
- Violation of Probation (1).

This successful operation was executed by the Marion County Sheriff’s Office, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Attorney General Uthmeier’s Office of Statewide Prosecution, U.S. Marshals Service, State Attorney’s Office of the Fifth Judicial Circuit, Florida Department of Law Enforcement, Florida Highway Patrol, Polk County Sheriff’s Office, Ocala Police Department, Port Orange Police Department, and the Lake City Police Department.

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