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Police, Feds increase gang control in Pueblo

Two PPD officers, two ATF agents work as a local team.

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THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

DENVER - Pueblo police and federal authorities have stepped up their partnership to get violent criminals and gang members off of Pueblo streets.

A key component in the crackdown is use of federal gun laws to send them to prison.

"You don't want people who are violent carrying firearms," said Troy Eid, U.S. Attorney for Colorado and a leader in the expanded crime-fighting effort.-

To develop more cases, Pueblo police a few months ago set up a joint operation with agents of the principal federal gun law enforcement agency, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

The police department dedicated two officers and the ATF assigned two agents to work as a team at police headquarters, Deputy Police Chief John Ercul said. The agents previously worked at the bureau's Colorado Springs office. Ercul said the arrangement is an asset in the department's crime-fighting cabinet.

The gun law used most frequently in the safe-streets strategy is one that prohibits persons previously convicted of felonies from having a gun or ammunition.

"It's one of the powerful tools we have to deal with hardened criminals who gain access to guns," Eid said. "We're not talking about law-abiding citizens having guns."

Cases that start as local crime investigations more and more are being funneled into federal court as a way to get longer prison terms for some of the worst criminals in Pueblo and elsewhere, Ercul and Eid said. Drug trafficking and gang shootings are examples of those types of cases.

A typical federal sentence for a felon caught with a gun or ammunition is 7 to 10 years in prison. That compares to a state sentence of 1 1/2 years or less if state laws, such as the armed career criminal act, are used, Eid said.

The goal is what law enforcement personnel call "getting more bang for the buck," said agent Carrie DiPirro, ATF spokesperson in Denver.

Eid said he largely leaves it up to local authorities to decide whether they want cases involving guns prosecuted in federal court or, instead, in state court because they "know who the bad guys are and who are the most dangerous."

"My goal is to encourage many more firearms prosecutions," Eid said.

Pueblo County District Attorney Bill Thiebaut said Eid has assisted local law enforcement in the fight against gangs, guns and drugs, as have several federal law enforcement agencies. "I am confident that attitude will remain the case, especially as more federal resources are allocated for such assistance."

Ercul said Pueblo police and ATF agents have worked together for years, but the joint team recently set up shows how the cooperation and effort have accelerated.

"Pueblo looks very different than the way Pueblo looked two years ago," Eid said. That is when he took office.

He has conferred at various times with Sheriff Kirk Taylor, Thiebaut and Police Chief Jim Billings. "I'm very interested in Pueblo," Eid said.

"I think I know Pueblo pretty well. I have great respect for law enforcement in Pueblo."

He said Billings has told him Pueblo criminals now less often take guns to their drug deals. "They've learned you might go to federal prison if they do."

Eid said gun-related prosecutions in federal court of cases from Southern Colorado, including Pueblo, have increased 55 per cent in the past two years.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Kurt Bohn has been assigned to prosecute cases from Southern Colorado "to have consistent liaison" between the U.S. Attorney's office and law enforcement officers in the region, Eid said.