



NEWS RELEASE

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AG to use State Grand Jury to Combat Gang Problem

McMaster: "We have a gang problem in this state"

Columbia, S.C. – In an effort to combat South Carolina's growing gang problem, Attorney General Henry McMaster announced today that his office would begin utilizing the state grand jury's drug jurisdiction to investigate and prosecute drug related gang activity as well other associated illegal activities.

"We have a gang problem in this state. It's growing and getting more violent," said McMaster. "While law enforcement has been vigorous in prosecuting gang crimes, it is clear that we still do not know the breadth and depth of the gang problem statewide. Therefore, it is appropriate to utilize the state's most powerful investigative tool, the state grand jury, to investigate and prosecute gang crime."

State Law Enforcement Division Chief Robert Stewart, Richland County Sheriff Leon Lott, State Senator Jake Knotts, Representative Jim Harrison and other law enforcement officials joined McMaster at the announcement on Wednesday.

McMaster explained that when dealing with police investigators, gang members conceal their drug trafficking activities by being uncooperative or silent, thereby resulting in a dead end for that drug investigation. And gang members know police can do little about their silence.

Gang members involved in drug investigations can be compelled to testify before the grand jury and if they refuse to cooperate, they can be jailed for contempt. By utilizing the state grand jury, the State can investigate and prosecute gang drug networks, learn how they operate and educate law enforcement and the public.

McMaster said he stands ready to assist local law enforcement and solicitors with gang related investigations by utilizing the state grand jury when permitted. He also said that following successful investigations and prosecutions, the state grand jury will issue an official report on gang activity in South Carolina.

The state grand jury has investigative and prosecutorial jurisdiction over multi-jurisdictional drug offenses, obscenity, public corruption, election fraud, computer crime violations, terrorism, and securities fraud. It is

used when regular police investigative techniques are not adequate for the case and require the state grand jury's ability to compel testimony and subpoena records, documents and evidence.

The idea for using the state grand jury to combat gang crimes came at the collaborative suggestion of Richland County Sheriff Leon Lott, whose Gang Unit had just finished briefing McMaster and his staff on the gang problem.

Lott has been at the forefront of the gang issue, creating the state's first Gang Unit, which has been gathering gang intelligence, and educating tens-of-thousands citizens on gang activity. Lott's Gang Unit has identified more than 50 gangs and approximately 850 potential gang members in Richland County alone.

"Drugs play a major role in virtually every gang activity," said Lott. "The state grand jury will allow law enforcement to work our way up the gang's organizational ladder."

State Law Enforcement Division Chief Robert Stewart, whose drug agents are assigned to the state grand jury, also welcomed the initiative.

"The state grand jury is a powerful investigative tool and surely will be of great assistance in combating gangs' illegal drug activities," said Stewart. "This should impact ill effects gangs have on our communities."

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