

Hidden war on drugs

Area police departments have to get resourceful to keep up with motorists trying to hide from the law

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LANCASTER -- On the surface, it looked like any other Pontiac G6. Inside the car, CD cases and articles of clothing were strewn about, animal hair from an unknown pet clung to the carpet, a child's doll sat forgotten on the back seat.

But there was something else among the clutter that immediately caught Lancaster police Sgt. Patrick Mortimer's attention.

The black sticky glue leaking from the car's center console was the first clue.

"I saw that, and I knew right away that it wasn't from something factory installed," said Mortimer. "The other officer I was with thought I was crazy, but I kept telling him that I knew there was something in there."

After finding a motor hidden deep within the car's dashboard, the officers were able to activate an aftermarket option. Turning on that hidden motor caused the lower half of center console to suddenly swing out from beneath the radio, revealing a hidden compartment containing \$7,000 in cash.

What began as a fairly routine vehicle stop and felony warrant arrest became the Lancaster Police Department's first encounter with an electronically controlled secret compartment in a suspect's car.

As the opioid epidemic has carried on, the technology drug sellers and smugglers have used to make their living has continued to evolve. As a result, departments throughout the state are getting their officers trained to spot the hidden compartments or "drug hides" that are continuously found in the vehicles of suspects.

"This was very professionally done. This was someone who's been pulled over before. He's been involved in investigations where people were looking into the vehicle and it went unnoticed during those times," said Lancaster police Lt. Everett Moody, who had been among the officers to examine the impounded Pontiac.

Just two days before officers in Lancaster made their discovery, police in Nashua, found a similar electronic compartment inside the car of a Lawrence man who was hiding roughly 130 grams of cocaine.

And 10 days earlier, police in Ipswich arrested a Boston man after finding large quantities of cocaine and fentanyl in the hidden compartments of his car.

"It almost seems like the more law enforcement learns, the more the criminals learn," said James Bazzinotti, whose company PACE New England offers the training course used by officers in Lancaster. "Everything the officers are learning now, the criminal element learned a few years ago. ... We're always a little bit behind."

Over the course of the training, Bazzinotti said officers learn all the clues to finding drug hides that range from the low-tech oil cans with false bottoms to the professionally installed electronic systems that cost more than the cars they're installed in.

Though extra spaces, or voids, can be found inside of any vehicle, and are frequently used by lower-level drug sellers, more complex ways of hiding illicit substances continue to be developed.

In many cases, compartments aren't opened by simply flipping a switch but by initiating a sequence of settings within the car, Bazzinotti explained. A single button on a dashboard might open a secret compartment, but the car might have to be in neutral, the heat might have to be dialed to a specific setting, and a single seat belt might have to be buckled in before that button can actually work.

"It's usually an owner-operator type of mechanic who does this kind of work," Bazzinotti said. "They might work on cars but supplement their income by doing this."

There's no law in Massachusetts against having a hidden compartment in your car, and no law against installing them either. However, mechanics can be arrested on a conspiracy charge if it can be proven that they knew what the hidden compartment was going to be used for, Bazzinotti said.

States like Ohio, California, Georgia, Illinois and Oregon have adopted prohibitions on vehicle compartments and attempts to pass similar legislation have been made in Massachusetts as well.

In 2008, a bill was submitted to the state Legislature that would have made it illegal to own or install a hidden compartment in a vehicle, though it never made it to the House floor.

Fitchburg Mayor Stephen DiNatale, who had sponsored the petition while serving as a state representative of the 3rd Worcester District, said he was inspired to file the bill after hearing about the prevalence of hidden compartments from local law enforcement officials.

"From what they showed me, it was pretty elaborate devices and modifications that were being made to these vehicles," DiNatale said. "These detectives have to go through a great deal of effort and work to find these things and yet there's no requisite penalty for having them."

He also explained that the bill had failed to gain any traction among other legislators largely because some felt its inclusion of vehicles such as aircrafts or boats was too broad.

"They didn't want the legislation to be so far-reaching that it would affect law-abiding citizens," DiNatale said.

The bill was refiled by current Fitchburg state Rep. Stephan Hay in January.

There is no way of measuring how many of these secret compartments are actually found and how many go unnoticed, but Mortimer estimates that a large majority of them go undetected.

However, the officers in Lancaster are undeterred.

"When you find one of these things it gets really exciting because it's not every day that you find one of these," he said. "Now everybody in the department wants to get trained."

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