



## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Pill Mill Operator Prosecuted Under Maryland's Drug Kingpin Statute Receives 20 Years in Jail *Eight Other Co-Defendants in Pill Mill Operation Sentenced***

**BALTIMORE, MD (June 12, 2018)** – Maryland Attorney General Brian E. Frosh announced today that the Honorable J. Michael Wachs of the Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County sentenced Tormarco Harris, 32, of Baltimore, to 20 years in prison without the possibility of parole. Tuesday's sentencing concludes a successful collaboration led by the Office of the Attorney General with federal and state law enforcement to combat Maryland's opioid crisis.

Harris was [indicted](#) in August 2017 along with nine other individuals for their role in a scheme to operate of two pill mills in Baltimore City and Glen Burnie. Each of Harris' codefendants—which include a doctor and two nurse practitioners who prescribed opiates without legitimate medical purpose—pleaded guilty. Sentencing for Harris' codefendants occurred earlier this month with one exception: Dr. Kofi Shaw-Taylor entered into a binding plea agreement with a predetermined 5-year term of incarceration that included restitution to the Maryland Medicaid Program and the forfeiture of certain seized assets.

"Harris' sentencing under the drug kingpin statute keeps him behind bars for a long time," said Attorney General Frosh. "He dealt deadly prescription drugs using pain management as the façade. He was just as dangerous as a heroin dealer on the street corner. Today's sentencing sends a strong message that our office and law enforcement partners will seek the harshest penalties to keep more people from dying of opioid abuse."

"Today's sentencing sends a clear message that health care fraud and diversion of these too often deadly drugs will not be tolerated," said Special Agent in Charge Maureen R. Dixon, Office of Inspector General for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "We will continue to work with our law enforcement partners to protect taxpayer funds and keep the public safe from these poisonous drugs."

"The sentence handed down today shows that doctors and other practitioners are not the only ones that are being held responsible for the proliferation of opiates that have flooded our streets and have caused an unprecedented amount of addiction," stated Assistant Special Agent in Charge Don Hibbert, Drug Enforcement Administration Baltimore District Office. "The owners and operators of 'pill mills' disguised as pain management clinics should be put on notice that they will also be held accountable to the fullest extent possible."

Following a bench trial in August, Harris was convicted on all counts in a 21-count superseding indictment. Specifically, Judge Wachs convicted Harris of one count of violating Maryland's drug kingpin statute; one count of conspiring to distribute controlled dangerous substances; 18 counts of distributing controlled dangerous substances; and one count of conspiracy to maintain a common nuisance.

According to evidence admitted at Harris' trial, Harris and Dr. Shaw-Taylor owned and operated Starlife Wellness Center in Glen Burnie, Maryland. From June 2015 through August 2017, Harris and Dr. Shaw-Taylor operated Starlife as a pill mill, where, in exchange for cash, patients received unlawful prescriptions for large quantities of narcotics, including oxycodone, morphine, tramadol, and benzodiazepine.

Evidence admitted at trial also established that: patients paid as much as \$500 in cash for their illegal prescriptions; on certain occasions, co-conspirator medical professionals working at Starlife were pressured to change prescriptions to prescribe higher quantities of narcotics to their patients; co-conspirator medical professionals wrote unlawful prescriptions for high volumes of oxycodone and other drugs to Harris and one of his relatives; and when law enforcement executed a search warrant at Harris's home in August 2017, they found a large amount of cash, prescription pads, a cash counting machine, and numerous letters from national pharmacy chains placing Harris on notice of the problematic prescription practices at Starlife.

Beginning in as late as June 2015, Harris and Dr. Shaw-Taylor also operated Westside Medical Group, located in Baltimore City, in a similar fashion until it was raided by law enforcement. Patients paid as much as \$450 in cash for their illegal prescriptions; prescriptions were being written by individuals without any medical qualifications to do so; prescriptions were being written for high volumes of oxycodone and dangerous combinations despite ample evidence in patient files of ongoing substance abuse issues and/or diversion.

Co-defendant **Happiness Aguzie** pleaded guilty to one count of Conspiracy to Distribute Controlled Dangerous Substances and one count of felony Medicaid Fraud. Aguzie was sentenced to a 10 year prison sentence with all but 3 years suspended. Aguzie was a licensed certified registered nurse practitioner who held a Maryland medical license and a registration number with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Similar to a medical doctor, Aguzie was qualified in Maryland to prescribe controlled dangerous substances. As a Medicaid provider, Medicaid would have unwittingly paid Aguzie for certain otherwise approved costs associated with the scheme. Aguzie was employed at both Starlife Wellness Center and Westside Medical Group and routinely wrote prescriptions for opioids in high doses and in high pill counts that were not for legitimate medical purposes.

Co-defendant **Minnie Ndem** pleaded guilty to one count of Conspiracy to Distribute Controlled Dangerous Substances. Ndem was sentenced to a 10 year prison sentence with all but 18 months suspended. Ndem was a licensed certified registered nurse practitioner who held a Maryland medical license and a registration number with the DEA. Similar to a medical doctor, Ndem was qualified in Maryland to prescribe controlled dangerous substances. Ndem was employed at Starlife Wellness Center from March 2016 until April 2017 and routinely wrote prescriptions for opioids in high doses and in high pill counts that were not for legitimate medical

purposes. While employed at Starlife, Ndem also prescribed controlled dangerous substances to co-defendant Harris.

Co-defendant **J. Alex McClary Green** pleaded guilty to one count of Conspiracy to Distribute Controlled Dangerous Substances and one count of felony Medicaid Fraud. Green was sentenced to a 10 year prison sentence with all but 9 months suspended. Green was a licensed clinical drug and alcohol counselor and/or licensed clinical professional counselor. Green worked at both Westside and Starlife from June 2015 until February 2017 providing drug and alcohol counseling to individuals receiving prescriptions for opioids. While employed at Starlife and Westside, Green would write prescriptions for opiates for himself and other individuals even though he was not qualified to prescribe controlled dangerous substances. Many of the individuals that Green would fill out prescriptions for were Medicaid recipients such that Medicaid would have unwittingly paid for the cost of the prescriptions.

Co-defendant **Kwame Asafo-Adjei** pleaded guilty to one count of Conspiracy to Commit Medicaid Fraud. Asafo-Adjei was sentenced to a 5 year prison sentence with all but 30 days suspended. Asafo-Adjei was an attorney, barred in the District of Columbia since 2011. Asafo-Adjei worked at Westside from as late as December 2016 through April 2017. Asafo-Adjei has no medical training and is not qualified to prescribe controlled dangerous substances. Nevertheless, Asafo-Adjei filled out prescriptions for individuals seeking opiates at Westside on numerous occasions. Many of these individuals were Medicaid beneficiaries such that Medicaid would have paid for the prescriptions that were filled out by Asafo-Adjei.

Co-defendant **Sabina Acquah** pleaded guilty to one count of felony Medicaid Fraud. Acquah was sentenced to a 5 year prison sentence with all but 15 days suspended. Acquah was the owner of Premier Medical Practice Solutions. Her sole client was defendant Dr. Shaw-Taylor, a longtime friend. Acquah submitted numerous fraudulent claims to Medicaid arising from the distribution of controlled dangerous substances at Westside.

Co-defendant **Monique Ford** pleaded guilty to one count of Conspiracy to Commit a Theft Scheme. Ford was sentenced to a 3 year prison sentence which was suspended in its entirety. Ford is a licensed certified nursing assistant and had been licensed as a medical technician. Ford worked at Westside from October 2016 through April 2017 and was placed there by a third party. Ford provided individuals seeking opiate prescriptions that were filled out by individuals

not qualified to prescribe controlled dangerous substances, such as co-defendant Asafo-Adjei, a lawyer.

Attorney General Frosh thanked the Medicaid Fraud Control Unit, particularly Assistant Attorneys General Marilee L. Miller and Brian A. Marsh, for their work on this matter. Attorney General Frosh also thanked the United States Drug Enforcement Administration and United States Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Inspector General, particularly Special Agent E. Troy Yeager, who led the investigation of the case. Attorney General Frosh also thanked the U.S. Attorney's Office, United States Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Howard County Police Department, Carroll County Sheriff's Office, Anne Arundel County Police Department, Baltimore County Police Department, and Baltimore City Police Department for their assistance during the investigation and prosecution of the case.