

BEST, an interagency collaboration model that's keeping the United States safer

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Border Enforcement Security Task Force (BEST) units in the United States (US) gather officers from more than 100 different law enforcement agencies under one roof, with the objective of identifying, investigating, disrupting and dismantling transnational organizations posing the greatest threat to border security, public safety and national security, by employing the full range of federal, state, local, tribal and international law enforcement resources. Over the years, BEST has become a successful interagency law enforcement collaboration model that's keeping the US safer.



Arrested members and associates of the El Paso-area Barrio Azteca gang are taken into custody during a multi-agency operation led by ICE's HSI special agents assigned to the BEST, and which included other law enforcement agencies jointly investigating the case, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Texas Department of Public Safety, the El Paso Police Department Gang Unit, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF).

THE BORDER ENFORCEMENT Security Task Force (BEST) units, established by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and led by ICE's Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), operate on the premise that in today's world, partnership is key to confronting the increased level of transnational crime. Hence, BEST's motto: 'United We Defend'.

BEST units were designed to identify, investigate, disrupt and dismantle transnational organizations posing the greatest threat to border security, public safety and national security, by employing the full range of federal, state, local, tribal, and international law enforcement resources. And therein lies the backbone of BEST.

These units conduct investigations using a threat-based, risk mitigation investigative task force model that recognizes the unique resources and capabilities of all participating law enforcement partners. BEST combines law enforcement resources into a comprehensive approach in order to tackle some of the most entrenched and toughest of crimes, including border violence, drug trafficking, bulk cash smuggling, arms smuggling, and illegal alien trafficking, smuggling and kidnapping.

While BEST's mission has remained the same since its inception in 2005, the units have grown, evolved, and become a highly formidable force. There are now 35 BEST units in the US, with four positioned at the northern border, 14 along the southwest border, and 17 located at seaports. On the international front, police offices from Brazil, Canada, Colombia and Mexico partner with BEST, with 100 agencies and 1,000 members participating.

History of BEST

In 2003, ICE was established under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to focus on smart immigration enforcement, prevent terrorism, and combat the illegal movement of people and goods. Two years into its role protecting the US and its people, ICE laid the ground work for the BEST initiative under Operation Black Jack. This investigation was molded into an international investigative task force to respond to evolving violence along the southwest border in Mexico.

That first task force, operating from Laredo, Texas, seized caches of grenades,

assault weapons, and bulk cash, resulting in arrests. The task force also helped to ensure that violence did not spill over the border, while assisting the Government of Mexico to address the escalating violence perpetrated by drug cartels, known for their flexibility, wealth, organization, intelligence, and ruthlessness.

The success of this operation prompted ICE to formalize BEST, incorporating personnel from US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and other key US federal, state, local, and international law enforcement agencies. These multi-agency task forces began collaborating and sharing information to fulfill an overarching goal: to interrupt the flow of cash, weapons and ammunition that fuel the illicit trade of drug cartels.

Operational principles that make BEST unique

BEST interagency collaboration takes place under one roof, with officers and agents from different agencies sitting across from each other every day working side by side. The absence of interagency conflict and employing the same methods of operation opens the door to enhanced law enforcement operations.

BEST units cut across 'red tape' when different layers of government and levels of bureaucracy at the city, state, and federal levels work together. The outcome is a robust team player attitude that drives the investigation, with every agency devoting their full magnitude of resources to accomplish the mission.

HSI Assistant Special Agent in Charge in Los Angeles Erik Cortes served as the task force supervisor of the Los Angeles BEST in 2008 before serving at ICE headquarters in Washington, D.C., as the unit chief for the National BEST where he oversaw all 35 BEST units.

Cortes said, "When investigations are free of agency egos, the result is more effective, productive and accomplished case work. BEST units give credence to the adage 'It is amazing how much can be accomplished if no one cares who gets the credit'."

Today, criminals travel not only from state-to-state, but from country-to-country; hence the critical necessity for officials to share law enforcement information and intelligence across state lines and beyond borders.

However, as Cortes explains, "Law enforcement information is generally shared from counterpart to counterpart." For instance, a sheriff's office in one jurisdiction tends to share information and communicate with other sheriffs' offices. "That's the natural way law enforcement agencies communicate with one another," Cortes added. "A hidden benefit of BEST," said Cortes, "is that it breaks through these barriers, transcending agency and office levels of information-sharing, keeping the investigation at the task force level."

He recalled a case that began in March 2009 in which the Los Angeles BEST and the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department's Cargo Criminal Apprehension Team (Cargo CATs) investigated a commercial cargo theft organization based out of Florida. The result was eight individuals convicted and sentenced, and the recovery of all the stolen merchandise totaling more than 2 million US dollars (USD).

While conducting surveillance, Los Angeles BEST and the Cargo CATs witnessed individuals breaking into a commercial warehouse in Brea, California. The suspects entered through the roof, and later loaded two stolen tractor trailers full of merchandise.

Law enforcement authorities recovered the tractor trailers, along with six pallets of stolen phones, three vehicles, and additional phones, clothing and equipment used during the burglary. Seven of the eight perpetrators were sentenced to 60 months in custody with three years' probation, and ordered to pay more than USD 43,000 in restitution.

Juan Orrantia, the HSI special agent who led this case said, "The state and local officers were amazing. They were familiar with all elements of the crime at the local level, and we depended on their expertise."

BEST Investigations

In an age in which smugglers and traffickers are getting more clever, creative and high-tech in their methods to move narcotics and other contraband, the cat and mouse game gets trickier. BEST units are increasingly discovering new criminal tactics, and shutting down one criminal enterprise after another. Examples of their investigative work include the following:

Two San Diego-area smuggling tunnels shuttered

Over the course of four days in April 2014, members of the BEST San Diego Tunnel Task Force unit, in collaboration with their enforcement counterparts in Mexico, uncovered two sophisticated smuggling tunnels connecting commercial buildings in San Diego's Otay Mesa industrial park with warehouses in neighbouring Tijuana, Mexico.



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The first tunnel, approximately 600 yards (548 meters) in length, was equipped with lighting, a crude rail system, and wooden trusses. The entrance point was a 70-foot (21 meters) shaft secured by a cement cover, and had a pulley system at the tunnel's US entrance to hoist contraband up into the warehouse. The second tunnel discovered was equipped with a multi-tiered electric rail system, and an array of ventilation equipment.

22 arrested in car trafficking ring connected to the Sinaloa drug cartel

The BEST in Albuquerque, New Mexico, together with the Albuquerque Police Department, conducted an extensive 10-month investigation into a car theft scheme in which stolen luxury vehicles from New Mexico were shipped to Mexico in exchange for methamphetamine and heroin.

During the enforcement action, more than 300 law enforcement authorities executed 12 simultaneous state search warrants, resulting in 22 arrests in June 2014. Authorities also recovered about 34 luxury vehicles with an estimated value of USD 2 million.

Violent street gang members and associates indicted for a host of crimes

The BEST in El Paso, Texas, conducted a multi-agency investigation that led to the arrest of 14 El Paso-area Barrio Azteca gang members and associates who were federally charged with conspiracy to violate the Racketeering Influenced Corrupt Organization (RICO) statute. In September 2014, the gang members were indicted for murder, extortion, robbery, assault, drug distribution, and money laundering.

Online seller of fake Cisco cables sentenced to prison and to forfeit more than USD 700,000

Following an investigation by BEST Seattle, a Seattle-area electronics company – Connectzone.com, LLC – and its owners were sentenced for conspiracy to traffic in counterfeit goods. In July 2014, Connectzone's owner, Daniel Oberholtzer, was sentenced to 37 months in a federal prison and three years of supervised release, and ordered to forfeit the proceeds from the counterfeit sales amounting to nearly USD 717,000.

The company conspired with a Chinese company to produce counterfeit Cisco Systems network products that were later sold as genuine products on websites operated by Connectzone. The BEST Seattle investigation revealed that the company obtained its counterfeit products from multiple foreign sources.

Canadian and US authorities shutter USD 30 million cross-border smuggling ring

In an investigation that crossed the US' northern border, BEST Massena worked with Canadian authorities to bring down a USD 30 million cross-border tobacco smuggling operation. In April 2014, 25 individuals were arrested, including an influential member of the Italian mafia in Montreal, and the alleged leader of the operation.

In this case, the mafia allegedly purchased contraband tobacco in the US and subsequently smuggled it into Canada through the Akwesasne Mohawk Reservations. Tribal organized crime assisted the mafia in importing and selling the contraband. During the investigation, more than 40,000 kg of tobacco was seized, worth USD 7 million on the black market, and representing an estimated tax loss of USD 10 million for

the Government of Canada. Nearly USD 450,000 in cash was also seized.

These BEST-led investigations, and thousands more, based their strategy on maximizing resources to create a strong law enforcement presence, combining criminal and administrative authorities, granting cross-designation authority to other federal, state and local law enforcement officers to investigate and enforce Customs laws under Title 19 of Section 1401 of the US Code (a consolidation and codification by subject matter of the general and permanent laws of the US), and using asset forfeiture authorities to offset expenses.

Since its inception, BEST investigators have initiated more than 13,100 cases. These actions have resulted in more than 16,200 criminal arrests with more than 8,500 convictions and 8,000 administrative arrests. Specifically, BEST units have seized more than 3.2 rounds of ammunition, 19,600 weapons, 5,700 vehicles, USD 194.9 million in currency and monetary instruments, and thousands of pounds of illegal drugs, including cocaine, ecstasy, heroin, marijuana and methamphetamine.

BEST member HSI Special Agent Jaime Zapata memorialized

BEST members serve courageously on the frontlines every day and put their lives on the line to keep the US and its people safe. HSI Special Agent Jaime Zapata was a BEST member whose name will be forever memorialized. Zapata was assigned to the BEST unit in Laredo, Texas. He was killed on 15 February 2011 after being shot by drug cartel members while he was on duty in Mexico.

On 7 December 2012, US President Barack Obama signed into law the Jaime Zapata Border Enforcement Security Task Force (BEST). The law amends the Homeland Security Act of 2002 to formally establish the BEST within DHS, authorizing the Secretary of Homeland Security to provide critical financial assistance for operational, administrative and technological costs associated with participation in the BEST.

'United We Defend' continues to be the BEST methodology and mindset that keeps these task forces at the top of their game.

More information

<http://www.ice.gov/best>