

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Federal Judge Sends Kai James to Prison in Multi-State Drug Operation Tied to St. Croix Airport and Prison

The 37-year-old's 10-year sentence stems from his leadership role in a ring that moved cocaine to the mainland U.S. and smuggled narcotics into prison; evidence included marijuana fields, cell phone intercepts, and dozens of recruited couriers.

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The U.S. Attorney's Office in the Virgin Islands announced on Tuesday that Kai James, 37, of St. Croix, has been sentenced to 120 months in federal prison for his role in a sprawling drug trafficking organization that smuggled cocaine and marijuana through the

Henry E. Rohlsen Airport and into the Golden Grove Correctional Facility.

U.S. District Judge Mark A. Kearney handed down the sentence on Tuesday. In addition to the 10-year prison term, James was sentenced to six years of supervised release.

James pleaded guilty in January to conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute cocaine and marijuana. Federal prosecutors said he served as a manager and supervisor in a criminal enterprise led by Ivan James, and composed of several other individuals—all of whom have also been sentenced for their roles.

According to the US DOJ, the drug trafficking operation was first uncovered in 2013, when corrections officers at the Golden Grove facility seized a cell phone from then-inmate Joh Williams. The phone contained text messages referencing narcotics distribution. A wiretap on a second phone confirmed Williams's continued involvement in drug smuggling from behind bars, with Ivan James acting as his supplier. Former corrections officer Vivian Ford was also implicated, accused of delivering drugs to the prison in food containers for Williams to distribute.

Outside prison walls, the network exploited secured access at the Henry Rohlsen Airport to smuggle multiple kilograms of cocaine per week onto commercial flights to the mainland United States. Testimony revealed that both Ivan and Kai James recruited couriers to transport bricks of cocaine to destinations such as New York, North Carolina, and Florida. Kai James alone employed as many as ten couriers, each carrying two to three kilograms of cocaine per trip, the U.S. Attorney's Office said.

A subsequent search of the James family residence uncovered marijuana, cocaine, cultivation equipment, and more than 1,000 marijuana plants in an adjacent field.

Ivan James, previously convicted by a federal jury, was found guilty of multiple charges including drug conspiracy, possession of 1,000 marijuana plants, firearms possession in furtherance of a drug conspiracy, and possession of firearms leading to the death of Levar Pogson. He was sentenced to 420 months in prison, followed by five years of supervised release.

Other members of the organization have received significant sentences:

- Joh Williams: 90 months in prison for drug conspiracy, followed by seven years of supervised release.
- Ariel Petersen: 93 months for firearms charges.
- Jahkiebo Joseph: 68 months for firearms and importation offenses.
- Malachi Benjamin: 72 months for firearms in furtherance of drug trafficking.
- Tillisa Ceaser: 62 months for drug conspiracy.

- Luis Ortiz, Jr.: 60 months for drug conspiracy

"The guilty plea of Kai James represents a decisive blow against the violent narcotics conspiracy that plagued the people of St. Croix for far too long," said DEA Caribbean Division Special Agent in Charge Michael A. Miranda. "We are proud to have worked alongside the USAO, HSI, FBI, CBP, and ATF to bring justice to those impacted by these crimes."

"This sentence sends a clear message, and it is credited to the extensive collaboration between federal and local law enforcement partners. Our joint efforts are essential in the U.S. Virgin Islands towards combatting violent crime, drug trafficking, weapons trafficking, and the myriads of other illicit activities of transnational criminal organizations operating in the territory," said Homeland Security Special Agent in Charge Rebecca Gonzalez-Ramos.

Acting U.S. Attorney Adam Sleeper commended the coordinated effort of the Drug Enforcement Administration, Homeland Security Investigations, Customs and Border Patrol, the Virgin Islands Police Department, and the Bureau of Corrections. "This sentence sends a clear message," he said.

The prosecution was part of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) program, a multi-agency initiative aimed at dismantling high-level criminal networks. The case was prosecuted by former U.S. Attorney Delia Smith, Acting Assistant U.S. Attorney Adam Sleeper, and lead OCDETF attorney Kyle Payne.