

Education: An Investigative Tool to Locate Methamphetamine Labs

Methamphetamine labs are on an increase throughout the country and this trend is only getting worse. Narcotics detectives can only find so many labs using the tried and true methods of undercover work, informants and trash runs. There is a method of investigation that can expand how many meth labs can be located and seized. This method of investigation is education.

By educating other police officers and certain members of the public the narcotics detective have expanded their ability to check for meth labs. The depth of the training will depend on who is being taught. The training for police officers will be more in-depth than with members of the public. We will look at what should be taught to each group.

This training for police officers should be as detailed as possible because the more knowledge police officers have about methamphetamine labs the better they can handle it. This does not mean that all police officers should be lab certified but they should have a basic understanding of how methamphetamine is manufactured and what to look for. The average police officers have been exposed to meth labs whether they knew they were at a methamphetamine lab or not. So it only makes sense to have all police officers trained on how to detect a meth lab. But it seems that the first item cut from the police budget is training, so most officers cannot travel and attend a several day course. So what training can be provided for the average officers?

The level of training will be determined by the length of time. A four hour training class will give the instructor time to quickly cover the different areas of

instruction. There are several topics that should be covered, such as the chemicals and equipment that can be used to manufacture methamphetamine (called a “cook”). The police officers should also be taught basically how methamphetamine is manufactured.

In a four hour class the above is a lot to cover but not all police departments are going to send their officers to a four hour class. There is an effective way to get the training to the officers; which is going to the officers. The place to find officers is at briefing. Almost all police departments have some type of briefing for the officers going on shift so this time can be used to do some basic training. To provide the training the instructor must adjust to the time available. If the instructor only has 20-30 minutes then the training needs to be quick and to the point, explaining what the officers should look for to identify a methamphetamine lab. Some training is better than none.

Three of the most common processes to manufacture methamphetamine are P2P, Red Phosphorous and Anhydrous Ammonia and each can have a variety of chemicals that can be used. The method of manufacture will determine the chemicals used. The training instructor must know which method is most common to the area. This way that method can be stressed more than the other methods.

The P2P method is rarely seen in most of the country but there are a few “cooks” still using this process. A quick overview of this method should be touched on. With the P2P method the lab tends to look like a chemistry set. Advise the officers that if it looks like a chemistry set (such as beakers, vials and

flasks) then something is wrong and they should get out and call a lab certified investigator.

The Red Phosphorous method is the main process used around the country to manufacture methamphetamine. There are hundreds of variations of the Red Phosphorous process. But there are a few basic chemicals used and these are what you need to teach the officers. The main chemicals are pseudoephedrine, iodine crystals and red phosphorous. There are several ways to obtain the chemicals so the course should teach the officers a few basic ways. Examples would be obtaining pseudoephedrine from cold tablets, iodine crystals from mixing hydrogen peroxide and tincture of iodine and getting red phosphorous from the striker plates of matches. There are too many different solvents to teach the officers, so the instructor needs to touch on the most commonly used ones at methamphetamine labs, in the area.

The instructor needs to give detailed information about the manufacture of methamphetamine. The instructor needs to explain the process so when police officers see a methamphetamine lab they will have an idea what stage the lab. It is not necessary to teach the quantities of each chemical used to manufacture methamphetamine but it is important the officers know which chemicals are used in each stage of a "cook". Besides if they really want to know the quantities all a person needs to do is check on the Internet.

The police officers should not always look for an operational or "cooking" lab but for a boxed up or stored lab. The other items they should be looking for are the waste or empty containers of the items needed to make meth. People

who make methamphetamine (“Cooks”) might be careful to hide their lab but often will leave empty containers of tincture of iodine, hydrogen peroxide, blister packs, etc. in the trash or lying around.

The other process that needs to be taught to the police officers is the Anhydrous Ammonia or Nazi process. Some of the chemicals are different than with the Red Phosphorous process. Instead of using red phosphorous and iodine crystals the “cook” uses lithium or sodium metal and anhydrous ammonia. The instructor needs to explain this process and how the chemicals are mixed together.

The equipment used to manufacture methamphetamine is often household items that have been converted. Depending on the process the items will vary so the instructor needs to know the most common items or any trends in the area. There are common items used in both processes such as mason jars or the different types bottles (plastic containers, gas cans or hydrogen peroxide containers) used as a gas generator. The officers need to have an understanding of the equipment needed to make methamphetamine so they can look for these items while out on calls.

It is a great aid if the instructor has a sample methamphetamine lab present to demonstrate and let the officers see what a lab might look like. This lab can be made by buying the most common items at a store. The containers can be emptied and cleaned out for demonstrations and safer transportation. All the items will fit in gym bag.

The other group to educate, as an investigative tool, is certain members of the public. It is important to decide who should be taught and what they should be taught. This will not be to the same detail as with the police officers. If they want to know more they can research it for themselves. This training is so they will be able to identify a methamphetamine lab if they run across one.

With the public the level of instruction should be advising them of the chemicals and different types of equipment used by “cooks”. The public members do not need to be told how the chemicals are mixed together or how to make methamphetamine. They just need to know what items to look for and be aware the quantities of these items will be more than normally used in a household. Also explain some of the household items that can be used for equipment but advise them not to limit their observation to just equipment. Advise the public when they find items they think are consistent with a methamphetamine lab they are not to take any law enforcement action. The people should leave and contact the police. Let the police do the enforcement.

Not all members of the public need to be educated. The people to concentrate on educating are those that will legally be in suspect’s house or are likely to observe a methamphetamine lab or those selling the chemicals. Some of the people to educate are social workers, building inspectors, teachers, school counselors, utility workers such as gas meter readers or electric company personnel, garbage collectors, cable TV installers, mail carriers, landlords and maintenance personnel. Sales people and loss prevention officers with the

stores that have the chemicals should also be taught what to look for to tell if someone is making a legitimate purchase of the chemicals.

This is just a sample of the people who can become eyes and ears (and nose) for the police. Educate people who can assist and will be responsible with their actions. It will be an educated guess if the people trained will be responsible but the amount of awareness and education will not be enough to teach them how to make methamphetamine. As stated earlier, if someone really wants to learn to make methamphetamine they only need to get on the Internet.

Education is not the only tool but is another tool that law enforcement can use to increase the number of investigations and seizures of methamphetamine labs. The more people aware of methamphetamine labs will result in more methamphetamine lab seizures, which results in more “cooks” going to jail and that is a good thing for the community.

Author

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Brian Sallee is a detective with the Albuquerque Police Department. Brian has been a police officer for over 26 years and has spent over 17 of those years working narcotics. Brian testifies as an Expert Witness on a range of areas including meth labs. Brian is also co-author of two books; “Narcotics Investigations; Working and Surviving” and “The Methamphetamine Handbook; What You Need to Know”