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Drug operations can leave toxic hazards behind

Health officials warn meth labs create a costly mess

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WAILUKU — When Maui vice officers raided a clandestine methamphetamine lab in a Wailuku apartment last year, among those notified was a state office responsible for overseeing decontamination of such hazardous sites.

About 30 days and \$12,000 later, the cleanup was completed, said Anna Fernandez, meth lab cleanup project coordinator for the state Department of Health's Hazard Evaluation and Emergency Response Office.

The landlord later received a Department of Health certificate saying the rental was safe to be occupied again.

Fernandez said the incident was the first — and so far only — test of a state law enacted in 2006 to establish guidelines for the decontamination of illegal methamphetamine manufacturing sites.

The law has generated interest from residents, including some landlords and rental property managers who last month attended statewide landlord training programs on keeping illegal activity out of rental property.

"We have gotten a lot of calls from concerned citizens," Fernandez said.

About 100 people signed up for the landlord training programs on Neighbor Islands, including Maui, while 350 people turned out on Oahu.

Some landlords reported coming across what they thought might be methamphetamine labs on their properties, Fernandez said.

She said some of the concern stems from Hawaii's ranking near the top of states in methamphetamine use.

"It's very unknown how many people are actually making the methamphetamine," she said. "I tend to feel we have a problem that is out there. It's just hard to stumble across these labs."

John Campbell, who led the landlord training programs, said methamphetamine labs aren't a new concern, noting they existed in 1989 in Oregon, where he lives.

But he said it was important for landlords to be informed about the serious issue.

"Many other types of bad behavior can happen more often," Campbell said. "But if a meth lab happens, it's a very bad thing.

"If another family moves in afterward, it's very bad for their health."

Chemicals used in manufacturing methamphetamine have been reported to affect the central nervous system, causing health problems including nose and throat irritation and headaches.

Campbell has led landlord training programs in 30 states, developing a training manual and program that grew out of his experiences in his neighborhood in Portland in the 1980s. He noticed that people were getting into fights but didn't realize what was happening until a neighbor pointed out that the trouble stemmed from a nearby drug house.

He also learned that the solution wasn't as simple as calling police and waiting for officers to raid the house.

Neighbors banded together to tackle the problem.

Fact Box

DRUG HOUSE

Signs of methamphetamine labs or other drug activity include:

- Chemical odors, including strong smells similar to fingernail polish and ammonia or cat urine.
- Rent paid in cash.
- Frequent visitors at all hours.
- Heavy traffic, including cars and pedestrians stopping at a home for brief periods.
- Paranoid, odd behavior of tenants, including an effort to keep people out of the area.
- Extensive security, including blackened windows and drawn curtains, alarm systems and extra locks and deadbolts.
- Large amounts of trash related to methamphetamine manufacturing, including empty containers of over-the-counter cold or allergy medicines containing the drug ephedrine and matchbooks used to obtain red phosphorus from striking plates.
- Dark red residue, left from the use of red phosphorus, on countertops, bathtubs or sinks.
- Chemistry equipment including flasks, beakers and rubber tubing.
- Stained or soiled vegetation.

"We began to realize it's actually landlords who can do a tremendous amount," Campbell said.

He said a basic tip is for landlords to carefully screen and do background checks on tenants and to monitor activity on their properties.

"The key with landlords is understanding that you're very rarely going to see someone who has a package saying 'this is illegal drugs' on the outside," Campbell said. "The signs that landlords see most are things that are legal by themselves."

He said the warning signs of drug activity include heavy traffic, with people coming and going from the rental, stopping only for brief periods. People may be bringing valuables such as televisions, videocassette recorders and cameras into the unit to pay for drugs.

Another concern is tenants who invite unscreened guests to move into the rental, Campbell said.

Drug dealers may eventually stop paying rent or utility bills and may damage the properties.

"The worst thing you can get is the drug dealers and the drug manufacturers and the people who are using drugs and inviting their friends over," Campbell said. "They don't take much care of the property. Then you have the neighbors calling."

He said landlords can help by doing regular maintenance and upkeep of their property.

"Well-maintained property helps in your screening process," he said. "Poorly maintained property is more likely to have poorly behaving tenants.

"Every landlord knows an empty unit is far less expensive than a problem tenant."

If a clandestine methamphetamine lab is found on property, the cleanup costs can range from \$2,500 to \$70,000, according to the Department of Health.

The property owners are responsible for the expense. But Fernandez said the Department of Health subsidized some of the \$12,000 cost in the Wailuku methamphetamine lab case, which occurred as the department was finalizing decontamination rules and procedures.

Police discovered the clandestine lab March 5, 2007, when vice officers executed a warrant to search an apartment in the Hale Makana O Waiale low-income housing complex on Waimaluha Lane.

Rudy Z. Bernardino, then a father of four, was alone in the three-bedroom apartment where police reported finding various chemicals associated with the processing of methamphetamine.

Police also seized a loaded .45-caliber revolver, a digital scale, glass pipe, plastic packets, propane cylinders, rubber tubing and a surveillance camera.

Following the discovery of the suspected methamphetamine lab, police evacuated other apartment units in the building and set up a decontamination area.

Among police officers at the apartment were members of a clandestine laboratory team trained to respond to such situations.

Capt. Gerald Matsunaga, commander of the police Vice Section, said the methamphetamine lab in the Wailuku apartment was the only one found on Maui last year. He said one or two clandestine labs were discovered in 2006.

"We don't have that many on Maui," Matsunaga said.

He said police investigate three to five complaints a year about clandestine drug labs, finding that most of the reports are unfounded.

Matsunaga said there have been fewer clandestine labs, in part because of stronger federal and state laws regulating the sale of chemicals used to manufacture methamphetamine. Certain chemicals would have to be shipped here, he said, because there are no industrial manufacturing sites here.

After being notified of the Wailuku meth lab, Fernandez and other state team members went there five days later, after the apartment had been ventilated and chemicals had been removed.

Police described the setup, pointing out where chemicals had been recovered.

"This individual was in the process of maybe his first attempt. He got as far as making a methamphetamine oil," Fernandez said. "You still have to do a couple more steps in order to get methamphetamine."

She said the complex janitorial staff did most of the cleanup. Afterward, a contractor was hired to do testing to see that the apartment met decontamination standards.

Fernandez said the state doesn't recommend specific contractors but encourages people to hire environmental consulting companies and contractors that are certified to do hazardous materials work.

The Wailuku case was closed last May, she said, after the state issued a "no further action" certificate saying the apartment was safe to be occupied.

But anyone who calls to check the location on the Department of Health database would find it listed as having been the site of a methamphetamine lab, she said.

Earlier this month, 30-year-old Bernardino was sentenced to a 20-year prison term after pleading no contest to first-degree methamphetamine trafficking in the case.

For now, the state meth lab cleanup project is alerted to the illegal labs only through law enforcement reports, Fernandez said.

She has met with groups and done presentations throughout the state to provide information about the project and final rules adopted just last December.

“It’s brand new,” Fernandez said. “We’re very anxious to get the word out.”

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