

Database aims to foil meth 'smurfers'

By LAURA BAUER

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Just two years after the country saw a drastic drop in the seizure of methamphetamine labs, the numbers are inching back up in pockets across the country.

Does that mean laws regulating cold medicine — meth's main ingredient — weren't the answer that police and legislators thought they would be?

Nope, authorities say. It just means that some meth cooks found a way around that law and now authorities are trying to get a step ahead. Yet again.

"They become familiar with techniques, they find out ways to do things differently," said Detective Howard Shipley, supervisor of the drug enforcement unit for the Reno County (Kan.) Sheriff's Department. "That's pretty common with the entire drug network. Change is constant."

This time, authorities say, meth cooks are "smurfing" — going from business to business buying all the cold medicine they legally can, hoping authorities don't catch on. Laws in both Kansas and Missouri limit the amount of pseudoephedrine a person can buy each day or each month.

Trouble is, these logs are kept on paper and not electronically. That means it can be tough and time-consuming to track and charge violators.

But authorities say they are taking the time and looking for solutions. They say they can't let the number of meth labs keep rising.

As of July 31, police agencies in Kansas seized 97 labs, the same number for all of 2007, according to statistics provided by the Kansas Bureau of Investigation. In Missouri, authorities busted 774 labs as of July 31, which appears to be slightly higher than in the same period last year.

Because of the increases, both states — as well as others — know they need to do more to track the smurfers.

Missouri Gov. Matt Blunt signed a law earlier this summer implementing an electronic database that is expected to be up and running sometime next year. Kansas has two pilot projects under way in which dozens of pharmacies have volunteered to test electronic databases, although large chains such as Wal-Mart and Walgreen's have yet to sign on.

"It's more effective for me if we can have the stores stop it right there by saying, 'Hey, you are over the limit, and we're not going to sell it to you,'" said Jeff Brandau, special agent with the Kansas Highway Patrol. "If we stop it from ever happening, it's much more effective than going after people who have already violated the law."

Even pharmacists are for a change in the tracking system. The way Sandra Bollinger, president of the Missouri Pharmacy Association, sees it, authorities needed to "get their teeth sunk into it (the legislation) first and then improve it even further."

"This is a drug that's being abused," Bollinger said. "We want to protect the integrity of medicine so it's used the way it's supposed to be used."

But Sandy Horton, sheriff of Kansas' Crawford County, worries about the danger electronic databases could put pharmacists in. He favors having the stores call authorities rather than confront someone trying to illegally buy pseudoephedrine.

"If somebody comes in there and they're strung out on meth, you have a chance of getting hurt over this deal," Horton said. "We don't need to put these pharmacists in jeopardy."

The need for electronic tracking doesn't mean the legislation regulating pseudoephedrine has not accomplished what authorities hoped it would.

Without the regulation, said Sgt. Jason Clark of the Missouri Highway Patrol, his state — for years the country's leader in meth labs — wouldn't have seen seizures go from nearly 2,300 in 2005 to about 1,200 in 2007.

"From where we were to where we are now, it's tremendous. I'm not complaining one bit," Clark said. "It's important we pay attention to the increase, but I don't think it's significant enough to say we have a major problem. ... It's no different than having a rash of bank robberies."

And when that happens, Clark said, police departments pull resources, go after the problem and the numbers go down again. That's exactly what Missouri and other states are doing, he said.

"Trends change because dopers still want the dope," Clark said. "They don't care what the consequences are."

It didn't take long for cooks to realize the pharmacist selling them the pseudoephedrine had no way of knowing how much they just bought at the store down the street. All the store had was their name and how much they purchased at their location and when.

Now, police see cooks traveling to different counties, even different states. They are finding people who have made a little business of their own by shopping for others.

"They're buying it at the store and selling it for \$25," said Horton, the sheriff in Crawford County, one of the counties where an electronic database will be tested. "They're making an instant \$10 profit on each box they're buying."

When it comes to stopping smurfing, authorities say it can take a lot of time and resources.

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When Reno County, Kan., started cracking down on those violating pseudoephedrine laws, detectives spent a lot of time on the road.

"We had to travel store to store, looking at their logs," Shipley said. "There's a lot of manpower tied up in it."

In April, Reno County authorities arrested 32 people for exceeding the legal limit of pseudoephedrine purchases. Detectives did another sting recently and arrested 100 people.

Last month, authorities in St. Louis announced the indictments of 68 people related to the illegal purchase of meth's main ingredient. Investigators said the arrests included eight meth

conspiracy cases responsible for dozens of meth labs in the St. Louis area.

Authorities say large sting operations and new initiatives will show cooks that it's not so easy to smurf. The numbers will change again, they say.

"I truly believe we'll have another decrease in meth labs and it's going to make our jobs immensely easier than they were," Clark said. "We're going to be able to put resources to other issues other than meth all the time."

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