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Fewer meth labs found in county

Police say crackdown repels manufacturers

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The meth labs that once plagued Thurston County have been virtually wiped out during the past five years, law enforcement officials said this week, but not the scourge of meth itself.

□ Many meth addicts still use and deal because of a steady stream of drugs produced outside the county, mostly in Mexico.

"Although the use is still there, the number of labs decreasing is significant good news," said Thurston County sheriff's Lt. Chris Mealy, supervisor of a special enforcement team formed in 2001 to find and shut down meth labs. "We hit the manufacturing pretty hard - it was a major enforcement."

The special team found and closed 69 meth labs in 2001, 64 in 2002, 41 in both 2003 and 2004, six last year and none so far this year, said Dan Kimball, the county's chief criminal deputy.

"It's good news for citizens," Kimball told Thurston County commissioners. "But we still do have a meth problem."

The meth labs are dangerous neighbors, attracting shady visitors, dragging down property values, contaminating soil and groundwater with chemical residue and threatening children who might wander onto the properties.

Other factors in the decline in meth labs are laws that limit over-the-counter purchases of cold medicines containing pseudoephedrine, an ingredient used in meth production, and increased public education leading to more tips for police.

Penalties for those arrested and charged in connection with the meth labs have been harsh, with many sent to prison and others driven out of the county, Mealy said.

"Between public awareness and our ability to target meth labs, it's dangerous to be a meth manufacturer in Thurston County right now," Mealy said.

Methamphetamine addiction still drives most property crimes in the county, including identity thefts, vehicle prowls, burglaries and auto thefts, said Kimball, a Democratic candidate for sheriff. Officials also have said the meth habit has fueled many copper thefts at construction sites.

County records show a rise in narcotics arrests - most thought to be meth-related - from 196 in the first six months of 2005 to 216 in the same period this year.

This year's rise is following a trend, said Lt. Loreli Thompson, head of the Thurston County Narcotics Task Force, a multi-agency team.

"The use went up significantly from 2004 to 2005, in terms of what we took off the street," Thompson said. The task force last week capped an 18-month investigation by arresting several alleged leaders of a major methamphetamine trafficking operation. Late Tuesday, the primary suspect in the trafficking ring was arrested by U.S. marshals west of Portland, investigators said Wednesday.

Crystal meth, which is smoked instead of injected like powdered meth, is the preferred form of the drug locally, Thompson said.

"That's what's coming out of Mexico, and also, it's apparently a little bit stronger."

County sources said little about the meth from Mexico, except that the production appears to be less expensive, and the manufacturing and distribution operations are more organized than when meth labs were plentiful in the county five years ago. The drugs appear to be coming across the border in cars and trucks, officials said.

On Kimball's recommendation, county commissioners this week voted to transfer more than \$14,000 from the meth lab special team's overtime pay to the purchase of high-tech surveillance equipment. The overtime pay, which covered officers who spent long hours processing meth labs after they were shut down, is no longer needed.

"Our duties haven't changed - we've just refocused," said county detective Tim Rudloff, a team member who assisted in last week's raid. "We're doing a lot more investigations on dealing and users - street-level, common street dealers who are feeding their own addictions and making a lot of money off of it."

Howard Thronson, the Republican candidate for sheriff, said he agreed with the commissioners' decision to transfer the money. The surveillance equipment will help track the supply stream from Mexico, he said.

"The problem is not going away," Thronson said. "But we now see opportunities more from traffic stops and seizures, where you end up arresting people in mobile drug labs or actual deliveries."

Court program rehabilitates drug users

Although the meth problem continues, Thurston County's intensive drug court program has taken more than 225 former meth users off the street.

The court-supervised program, started in 1998, lasts one to two years. In exchange for staying clean and sober, participants receive counseling, group therapy, one-on-one monitoring, substance abuse education, and training in communication skills, diet, nutrition, goal-setting and relapse prevention, said Ellen Goodman, drug court program administrator.

If participants start using, however, the judge will throw them in jail.

Women in the program have given birth to 17 drug-free babies, Goodman said.

"For every day that a person is out there in our program," she added, "that's a day that they're not out there using, doing crimes."

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