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Methamphetamine on the rise in Pekin - again

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PEKIN - Operation Rattlesnake may be the answer to a growing methamphetamine problem in Pekin.

Several arrests made by the Pekin Police Department in the past few months suggest methamphetamine labs and methamphetamine use are on the comeback since the scourge was nearly eradicated in 2005.

With a handful of recent methamphetamine lab and paraphernalia arrests, the police department is beginning to show some concern.

"Because we have had a handful of methamphetamine arrests, the police have taken notice and have begun to institute actions to address the problem," said Pekin Police Detective Chris Bitner.

Bitner said this is not the first time police have seen a rise in methamphetamine use in Pekin.

In early 2003, area law enforcement agencies began noticing the impact of the drug after nearly 179 arrests were made in connection with methamphetamines in 2002.

In response to those arrests, law enforcement officers with the Pekin Police Department, Tazewell County Sheriff's Department, Illinois State Police and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency combined forces to battle the manufacturing, sale and use of the illegal drug. They termed that combined force Operation Rattlesnake.

By 2005, authorities accomplished a 95 percent reduction in methamphetamine lab arrests as well as a 98 percent reduction in manufacturing the drug.

Most significantly though, police witnessed a 100 percent reduction in possession of precursors - materials used to manufacture meth.

"As a result of Operation Rattlesnake, we were able to convict multiple people," said Bitner.

With the recent spike in arrests, Bitner said Operation Rattlesnake could make a comeback of its own.

"We are starting to speak to our old law enforcement partners in Operation Rattlesnake," he said.

But the detective would not comment on any immediate plans for the group.

Bitner said the department is prepared to make a strong stance against those who use the drug if arrests continue to increase.

"We will become more aggressive in our prosecution, data building, and hunting down people who deal methamphetamine."

In an effort to help combat the use of methamphetamine use in Pekin, police have asked for the community's help.

Bitner said community members can play an active role in the efforts to keep methamphetamine off the streets.

"Evidence of methamphetamine use consists of a horrendous smell similar to cat urine or ether. People can keep an eye out for a lot of foot traffic near homes and look for materials consistent with the manufacturing of the drug."

Bitner said the materials needed to support a methamphetamine lab consist of large amounts of glass jars, hot plates, duct tape, rubber tubing, milk jugs, pseudoephedrine pills, drain cleaner and engine starter fluid.

Anyone who believes he or she may have information on a methamphetamine lab or the sale of the drug can contact the police or leave an anonymous tip with Crimestoppers.

According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency Web site, methamphetamine use has become the second highest drug of choice for addicts in the Midwest.

"Methamphetamine is second only to alcohol and marijuana as the drug used more frequently in many Western and Midwestern states. Seizures of dangerous laboratory materials have increased dramatically. In some states, fivefold," according to the DEA Web site.

"In response, many special task forces and local and federal initiatives have been developed to target methamphetamine production and use."

Tazewell County State's Attorney Stewart Umholtz said that his office has been working with law enforcement agencies in order to provide support for the departments.

"We are working with local police departments to develop appropriate measures," said Umholtz.

"We share their concern and we want to stay ahead of the curve."

The state's attorney said that although new laws set forth by officials in Springfield have been successful, it will also be up to police officials to ensure the success by their own coordinated efforts with each other.

"It's not just the legislator that is going to fix the problem, it is the officer or detective working the cases that will."

In a May 2007 press release from the office of Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich, the state leader acknowledged that methamphetamine use in Illinois has become a serious problem in almost every county in the state.

"Meth has become a growing crisis in the state of Illinois with prison admissions rising from only six in fiscal year 1999 to 421 in fiscal year 2004," said Blagojevich.

"The current prison population for meth offenders is more than 800, with countless others in prison who are believed to have committed their offense while under the influence of the drug. In 2002, Illinois State Police seized 668 meth labs statewide and made 820 related arrests. By 2006, the number of seizures had grown to 786, and accounted for over 1,100 arrests."

Also in May, the Pekin agriculture company Ag-Land FS Inc., located at 1505 Valle Vista Blvd., received the third highest amount of funds offered by the state supported Anhydrous Ammonia Security Grant. The award was for \$54,631.

The funds were granted on the basis of helping agriculture companies prevent the theft of anhydrous ammonia, a type of liquid fertilizer that is a key ingredient used in the manufacturing of methamphetamine.

After receiving the funds, Ross Dowell, operation manager for Ag-Land FS Inc., said the company took a proactive approach to the theft of anhydrous ammonia.

"We just want to be a positive part of the community. The company has installed security cameras at 10 facilities and locks for nearly 450 anhydrous ammonia tanks," said Dowell.

"Since we installed the locks and cameras we have seen significant results."

In order to deter thieves, the company has also invested nearly \$30,000 of its own money into security equipment.