

"Southern Illinois U.: Meth-related incidents increase in southern Illinois"

2/10/06- U-Wire (Carbondale, IL)

By Bethany Krajelis, Daily Egyptian (Southern Illinois U.)

CARBONDALE, Ill. -- It's not just a rural thing anymore. The methamphetamine epidemic has hit southern Illinois strong, and officials say this dangerous and attractive drug is migrating into more urban areas. Even though statistics show an increase of area meth labs, Tom McNamara, special projects director for Southern Illinois Enforcement Group, said community awareness and reporting is also increasing.

"It could be happening all around you," McNamara said. "Under a bridge, next door, in the car behind you, in front of you. Anywhere."

Nearly 30 law enforcement officers spent the week learning the ins-and-outs of meth, how to dismantle a lab and deal with the toxic chemicals used to produce the man-made stimulant. Thursday's mock meth lab at the Carbondale Range was part of 40-hour class taught by the enforcement group and other meth and law enforcement experts.

It was the third class to take place through a grant the county received from the state.

But this time around, McNamara said officers from northern Illinois, like Cook County and Rockford, attended the class. While most think meth is a rural addiction because of the easy access to anhydrous ammonia, a farming ingredient used to make the drug, McNamara said there are more than 30 ways to make the drug regardless of location.

According to McNamara, there were 78 meth labs, dumpsites or meth-related equipment reported in Jackson County, Ill., in 2005. In 2004, 49 lab sites were reported, which was down from 62 in 2003.

It's not just Jackson County seeing an increase in meth-related incidents. In 1997, The Illinois State Police seized 24 meth labs across the state, and in 2002, which is the last year reported, 677 labs were seized statewide.

While classes like the one on Thursday help educate officers, McNamara said there have been several coalitions formed and seminars held to get the community involved, which he said has helped increase reporting.

"There has been more of community response, something that we never had before," McNamara said. "The more people know, the more we'll find."

And that is what Michelle Hamilton hopes to do. As the director for the center of business and industry at John A. Logan Community College, she said she saw the need to get the future workforce involved.

Hamilton said teaching people going into law enforcement, childcare and medical fields about meth will help them spot signs and stop problems before they occur. She said two seminars drawing more than 500 people have taken place to bring awareness to the area.

Jackson County Sheriff Bob Burns said with more citizens recognizing signs of meth production or use, he doesn't doubt the number will continue to increase. The sheriff's department currently

has six officers trained to dismantle meth labs. He said some days they will find several meth-related sites, but can go weeks without one.

McNamara said he does expect to see a decrease in small lab meth productions because of recent cold medicine restrictions.

In the past few years, legislation has been passed that put restrictions on purchasing cold medicines with pseudophrine. In January, a law went into effect that required people buying the cold medicine to show identification and sign a logbook.

The law is designed to prevent people from buying more than two packages of the cold medicine. However, McNamara said it is difficult to say how this is working because the law is so new.

"We know we're not going to stop the meth epidemic," McNamara said. "We're very fortunate to have concerned legislators. As a consequence, we have lots of tools to help fight meth. It was much needed."