

Meth Labs: The Health Department Prepares

Unfortunately, many health departments receive a crash course in clandestine methamphetamine production when a lab is first discovered in their jurisdiction. Once revealed, health departments must identify the human health hazards, offer methods of remediation and determine when an area is fit for habitation.

Due to the evolving cooking methods of meth and the multitude of chemicals used at an active lab, the challenge exists for health departments to ensure that a proper assessment and clean-up practices have taken place. Fortunately, Waushara County has taken a proactive stance and is putting measures into place to deal with this problem. Governmental incentives designed to deal with this mounting problem have greatly helped. For example, in 2003, Winnebago County Health Department received a Prevention Grant and was given the task to develop a response plan for clandestine chemical labs. Their work provided the a template for what is developing into a comprehensive, County wide plan to deal with clandestine laboratories, persons exposed, and the environmental impact factors associated with such sites.

Waushara County's Health Department's plan focuses on developing three key components: a standard operating procedure for assessing the human health hazards at a methamphetamine lab, an inspection report to complete a thorough assessment and an authorization for designee form to ensure abatement orders are followed. The standard operating procedure explains, in a systematic format, how to actively respond when a meth lab is discovered. The inspection and abatement report will be used as a guide to ensure a comprehensive human health hazard assessment is conducted. This report breaks down the hazards into categories: air quality, non-laboratory equipment, laboratory equipment, absorbent materials, contaminated hard surfaces in poor/good repair, appliances, plumbing/septic systems and outside environment contamination. Each category lists the type of abatement needed, remediation methods and rationale involved. Additional areas are available where notes and the completion date can be documented. To respond to the important concern of when children are found at an active meth lab, a protocol was developed for the Health Department and examining physician. Lastly, the authorization of designee form was developed to document the responsible party who will be conducting the necessary clean-up and eliminating the human health hazard.

It is our hope that this plan, along with continued support from the state legislature and governmental agencies, will enable Waushara County to be on the front-line in the fight against meth.