

Meth labs spawn testing, cleanup industry

By Rick Armon
Beacon Journal staff writer

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Roy Wilkinson waved the meth scanner around the kitchen pantry. The red "Meth" light on the futuristic-looking, hand-held scanner blinked on at numerous spots, indicating a positive hit. Not a good sign, since the property owner had cleaned the pantry to get rid of the meth spill in the Akron home. So Wilkinson, owner of Safety Elements in Akron, double-checked the scanner, which can provide false positives. He conducted two separate swab tests that are 99.9 percent reliable. Each one came up negative. No methamphetamine.



Roy Wilkinson of Safety Elements checks a small pantry area for meth residue. (Mike Cardew/Akron Beacon Journal)

Wilkinson and others who test for and clean up after meth labs are experiencing a business boom because of the ongoing meth problem in Ohio. Last year, the Summit County Drug Unit busted 68 meth labs, which turn homes, motel rooms, storage lockers and anywhere else the drug is made into a toxic waste site.

The need for professional testing and cleanup services is expected to keep growing, experts said, as people become more aware of the potential health hazards of living in a former meth lab. Landlords, hotel owners and others also are starting to understand the legal ramifications of renting homes, apartments or rooms used in meth operations without first cleaning them.

"We get tons of phone calls regarding meth labs. We get them every day," said Marc Onesta, owner of Bio Clean Services in Hudson, which began offering the testing and cleanup services in 2006. "Companies like mine are benefiting from other people's crimes." Public awareness has grown thanks to media reports about the meth problem and Web sites such as the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's National Clandestine Laboratory Register and Summit County Meth Awareness. Both sites identify locations of busted meth labs. "The awareness is out there," Onesta said. "Everybody knows what a meth lab is. I don't have to explain to anybody. Meth lab? Bad. Two years ago, no one really knew."



Meth is a drug manufactured by cooking ingredients, including over-the-counter medications. The cooking process creates dangerous chemical residues that can seep into walls and carpeting. Exposure to those chemicals can cause headaches, chest pain, nausea, dizziness and other problems, depending on the length and type of the exposure, according to health experts.

No regulation

Despite the hazard, Ohio and most other states have no cleanup standards that determine

when a meth-tainted property is safe again. Ohio also doesn't regulate meth testing and cleanup companies. Anyone can start a meth cleanup company or add the service to an existing firm without training or knowledge about the drug. That's happening, industry leaders said, because companies can make a lot of money.

It can cost anywhere from \$200 to \$1,200 for the tests and \$2,000 to \$6,000 for the cleanup. Those costs can be higher if the meth exposure is severe, and those costs do not include replacing carpeting and drywall or other repairs. Meth isn't something that can just be wiped up, vacuumed or painted over — that can actually spread the chemicals, experts said. They worry that shady operators could pocket money without removing the health hazard.

"What's an expert and who's qualified?" said Dale Cillian, president of the American Bio-Recovery Association and owner of BIOPRO in Gilbert, Ariz. "That's a real big problem." Ohio should license meth workers similar to plumbers and electricians to ensure they know what they are doing, industry leaders said. The state also needs to develop cleanup standards, they said. "Everyone knows you have to clean up a meth lab, but you have to do it the right way," Onesta said.

Congress approved the Methamphetamine Research and Remediation Act that requires the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to develop cleanup guidelines for states and municipalities. The EPA is still working on the guidelines and expects to release them by the end of September. State Rep. Stephen Dyer, D-Green, a former Beacon Journal reporter who wrote about the local meth problem, has proposed legislation to require disclosure by property owners and to direct the Ohio Department of Health to develop statewide cleanup standards. His proposal also would allow victims — property owners whose homes or apartments are damaged without their knowledge — to tap into state funding set aside for crime victims to help pay for cleanup. Considering the increase in meth testing and cleanup companies, the state also should explore whether those operators should be regulated, he said.

Testing

Wilkinson, who also is a full-time Akron firefighter and served last year on the Summit County Methamphetamine Property Awareness Task Force, carries a giant black and yellow toolbox around in the back of his SUV on meth calls. The toolbox contains a \$5,000 CDEX meth scanner and other gadgets, such as an item that works similarly to a pregnancy test and allows him to identify the presence of meth.

Wilkinson started his company a year ago after seeing firsthand the damage caused by meth as a firefighter and member of the Summit County HazMat team. Wilkinson returned to an Akron home recently to retest the property. He had been there once and found meth residue in a kitchen pantry, where a bottle filled with meth had exploded. The property owner decided to try to clean the pantry himself and called in Wilkinson to make sure he had done it right. Wilkinson wore blue booties and purple gloves for protection as he entered the home. In other cases, he wears a mask or even HazMat suit, depending on the extent of the meth damage. He said he receives calls all the time for testing and advice, including calls from car rental com-



panies, motels, the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority and Summit County Children Services.

"People don't know what to do," Wilkinson said. "There are hundreds of houses that have been contaminated [in the Akron area]," he added. "It's unbelievable . . ."

Meth aftermath

Tom Dubetz, who owns apartment complexes in the Akron area, was shocked when police busted a meth lab at one of his units in Kent last year. He said he didn't want to worry about the potential health effects for future tenants and he didn't want to be slapped with a lawsuit because he didn't do anything to clean up the property. He also knew that the apartment would show up on government-sponsored meth lab Web sites. So he hired Bio Clean to ensure the property would be safe to lease again. He estimated that he spent \$8,000 for the cleanup and another \$3,000 for new carpeting, paint and drywall. "They were very professional and very good with what they were doing," Dubetz said. "I don't have to worry about it now because everything was done professionally."

Rick Armon can be reached at 330-996-3569 or rarmon@thebeaconjournal.com.

Understanding 'meth'

Want to learn more about methamphetamines? Go online to:

- U.S. Department of Justice: <http://www.usdoj.gov/methawareness/>
- U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration: <http://www.usdoj.gov/dea/seizures/index.html>
- Summit County: <http://www.co.summit.oh.us/scma.htm>
- Bio Clean Services: <http://www.biocleanservices.com>
- Safety Elements: <http://www.hazmatandmore.com>