

Meth contamination surprising concern for homebuyers

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SHERIDAN — The house looked completely normal, a structurally sound building located in a quiet, residential neighborhood in Sheridan.

“The house wasn’t really abused or anything,” local realtor Dan Casey said. “It all looked pretty nice.” But, inside the walls, in the ductwork, even buried in the carpet — the house was hiding a dangerous secret.

In a country where prospective homeowners usually test for mold, lead-based paint, asbestos and countless other possible problems, this particular residence was contaminated with methamphetamine, a potentially toxic but often-overlooked issue in the world of renting and home buying.

### **Meth in your home?**

Not my house, most people think — I vacuumed, scrubbed and repainted. I would definitely know if people previously smoked or manufactured meth in this home. Responsible homeowners don’t use meth — it’s a drug for street urchins or the homeless.

If you had any of these thoughts, you’d be wrong on all counts.

Methamphetamine is a pervasive drug found all over the United States, hitting every demographic from rich to poor in small towns and big cities. Any house in any part of the country could have experienced some level of meth use since the drug came into existence in the first half of the 20th century.

When a person smokes or manufactures methamphetamine, the powerful cocktail of chemicals — including pseudoephedrine, a decongestant, and other toxic ingredients like lye and drain cleaner — disperses into a wide area. The smoke and associated chemicals move from one room to another and often get into ductwork and onto all surfaces.

And it sticks around. Casey, a realtor with ERA Carroll Realty, said meth lasts on surfaces for many, many years. Say a homeowner — or child, friend, relative, friend of a friend, etc. — smoked or cooked meth inside a home. Even after that individual moves away and the house sits vacant, say for a year or two, the new homebuyer still has reason to be concerned.

“Even if you’ve been in there cleaning it and scrubbing or whatever, it’ll test positive 10 years later,” Casey explained. “The half-life of meth is 250 years.”

Many homeowners or people shopping for a home have any idea their house could be contaminated. No one, from the federal government to the state of Wyoming or the city of Sheridan, mandates any sort of reporting.

“There is no registry that we have,” Sheridan Police Department Lt. Tom Ringley confirmed. “It would be up to the buyer and the realtor to be aware and do their research and ask questions of the seller or the landlord.”

Disclosure forms ask sellers and selling agents numerous questions about the history of a home, but Casey said meth is not specifically mentioned.

“It doesn’t really ask and you don’t really answer,” he said.

Residents could file a public information request with local police, but a call sheet does not guarantee success. Take the house in the beginning of this story — police registered domestic disputes and several other calls, but drug use or manufacturing never came up, according to Casey.

The DEA maintains a national registry of lab operations, but the list only includes three Sheridan

addresses — and each was posted on the list on Sept. 4, 2004. A Wyoming Department of Health spokesperson said it stopped tracking meth properties more than a decade ago.

Homebuyers and realtors work together regarding inspections. Ultimately, the choices come down to what a homebuyer wants to pay for. Do they want a whole-home inspection? Should they include electrical? Do they want to test for lead-based paint?

Casey, who recently started a firm called 307 Environmental with partner David Walker, wants every checklist to include methamphetamine. He said his company and ERA Carroll are encouraging Sheridan realty companies and inspectors to test for meth and ensure best practices for decontamination. Even individuals who understand the risks of meth are sometimes hesitant to test for a number of reasons, but a big factor is cost. Inexpensive, store-bought kits are often unreliable, Casey said. A comprehensive test costs up to \$300. Decontamination involves individuals in HAZMAT suits specially cleaning hard surfaces and ducts while ripping out carpets and any other soft or porous surfaces, a process which can cost several thousand dollars.

While his company could stand to benefit from better awareness, Casey said the work is more of a “calling” about a problem many people don’t want to face.

“The more I looked into it, just the whole thing with meth usage and abuse is terrible,” he said. “I never really realized how bad that drug is.”

### **How harmful is third-hand meth?**

Experts paint a descriptive picture of how dangerous methamphetamine is for people who use the drug (see the sidebar).

But how bad is second- or third-hand methamphetamine picked up from contaminated buildings or surfaces? Scientists are not sure.

The National Jewish Medical and Research Center completed several studies on the dispersion of methamphetamine during cooking and smoking. While the scientists studied the levels of surface contamination that came from these activities, the long-term health effects related to exposure are unknown. The Center’s studies noted the lack of documented health statistics, and no papers have been published on the matter.

“What we don’t really know is what does it mean for you and I to be living in an area where there might be 10 micrograms per sample for methamphetamine,” said Paul Pope, a chemist and project manager with Utah-based ALS Environmental.

The Wyoming Legislature set the acceptable level of methamphetamine at 0.75 microgram per 100 cm<sup>2</sup>. Utah actually has a slightly less stringent standard than Wyoming at 1 microgram per 100 cm<sup>2</sup>. Utah legislators settled on this figure, Pope said, because of the potential to cause health effects for a baby crawling around on the floor, getting meth on their clothing and skin.

While hard data is absent, anecdotal reports listed in the Center’s report link meth exposure with increased incidences of asthma, pulmonary fibrosis and upper respiratory complaints, especially amongst children.

Pope said he would be comfortable living in a home with up to 10 micrograms per 100 cm<sup>2</sup> on hard surfaces since this amount would decrease over time with regular cleaning. He admitted, however, that carpets and porous surfaces create further issues that might need addressed.

Either way, for prospective homebuyers or even renters, testing for meth is a very good idea — no matter where the house is or what it looks like. The home where Casey found contamination was very clean and in a nice neighborhood.

“That’s a misconception,” Pope said. “A lot of people assume that if you buy a home in what you would

assume would be a fairly nice, affluent neighborhood, then it wouldn't be a problem.

"It's actually quite the opposite," he added. "People (meth manufacturers) that know what they're doing, they'll actually go into a nice neighborhood and set up a shop there because that's where they least suspect having a problem ... as far as being caught."

Pope, meanwhile, purchased a house about four months ago and tested for meth right away. He will continue doing so in the future because, while the health effects are inconclusive, the perceptions of drug use are not. Many sellers have lost deals when a potential homebuyer walked away at the first sign of meth. Sellers could also face court action if they have knowledge of drug use and do not disclose that information.

"From here on out, any properties I look to purchase, that's one of the first things that I plan to do is have a methamphetamine test," Pope said. "Even if I'm not so concerned about the levels myself, it does become an issue when it comes to reselling that property."