

## **Unfit for humans: Meth leaves mark not only on addicts, but their homes, too**

**Leftover chemicals can poison the air**

**by Sarah Einselen**

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LOGANSPOUR — As methamphetamine is made, its leftover chemicals poison the air.

If you breathe them in, they could burn you. They sink into the furniture and the floor. To safely enter someplace where meth was manufactured, you have to be covered, head to toe, in a hazmat suit.

It's as if everything the chemicals touch becomes leprous. And for all practical purposes, houses which become contaminated by the manufacture of methamphetamine might as well be.

The Cass County Health Department worked on 30 meth-contaminated sites last year after state police found meth precursors or active meth labs, according to state police data provided by the department's environmental inspector.

That's comparable to the number of meth-contaminated sites the health department dealt with in 2014, inspector Mike Collins said. Most of the sites in 2015 — or about 25 — were structures of some type, like houses or garages, inspector Mike Collins said.

Nearly all were inhabited, not vacant or abandoned.

"I would say 95 percent or more, people are renting or living there," Collins said. Many meth cooks contaminate the rentals they're living in, he added, leaving the landlord with the cost of the cleanup.

It's Collins's job to track down the owner of the building and give the bad news: By law, the owner has 90 days to have the building tested and cleaned by a certified meth cleanup firm, and the cost must be borne by the property owner or their insurance, not the meth cook.

The cost of testing usually runs \$300 to \$600, Collins said. Then depending on how much residue is left, cleanup can cost anywhere from \$2,000 to \$12,000 or more. And it's not necessarily covered by property insurance.

But until declared clean by the local health department, such houses can't legally be lived in or sold, according to the Indiana Department of Environmental Management.

In the meantime, a scarlet letter — a health inspector's sign shouting "Dwelling unfit for human habitation" in all capital letters — hangs on the door.

The sign stays until a certified cleanup firm has tested the structure for contamination and cleared away any trace of meth-cooking residues, or until the structure is demolished.

If the property is inspected and found not to have been contaminated — maybe law enforcement arrested the meth cooks before they got going, Collins explained — it may be declared clean so quickly Collins doesn't have time to put the sign up. Legally, he's required to wait 15 days after receiving notification from state police before he can post it.

However, if the property owner doesn't have it inspected and cleaned, if necessary, by the end of the 90-day period, the property owner gets another letter — this time from the county attorney.

"Usually people wake up when they get a letter from an attorney," Collins said. He estimated more than nine out of 10 properties are cleaned up before or soon after the attorney gets involved.

In the few cases that aren't cleaned up, the county files suit against the property owners.

Collins currently has files on five cases that are in litigation, the most he's had at one time. He says it's possible the properties will be cleaned up before the hearings — he's never testified in court yet on a meth case.

“These five cases that are going to go to court may not even make it to court,” Collins said. And then there are the cases that go uninspected or are left contaminated for months, even years. Indiana State Police maintains a database of properties where at least six months have passed since a meth lab was seized. Cass County has at least 30 houses or other buildings on the ISP’s naughty list, stemming from meth labs seized as far back as 2007.

Properties are removed from the database within three months of being cleaned up, according to the ISP.

Once the certified inspector has notified the health department that a property is clean, Collins takes down his sign and marks the case abated, or closed. It’s then legal to reoccupy the property or put it on the market to be sold, if the owner wants.

The trick is finding willing occupants or buyers.

By law, property owners must disclose whether a property for sale is contaminated by meth residues or if meth was ever manufactured there.

“If there is, then we stop the presses right there,” local real estate broker Tom Scheetz said.

Scheetz, part owner of Galloway, Murray and Scheetz firm in Logansport, said few sellers his firm has dealt with have reported meth contamination — he could only recall one property one of his partners had listed after the owners had already had cleanup carried out.

“Mold’s a bigger issue than meth, for us,” Scheetz said. On the other hand, he believes owners of properties where meth has been manufactured are likely to lie about it on the sales disclosure, even though it’s illegal to do so.

Scheetz considers himself lucky that he’s not had a house listed where he even suspected meth had been manufactured. He would rather not list a house that had been contaminated by meth, he said, even if it had been cleaned up.

Acknowledging previous meth contamination is “like putting a red flag up,” he said. “I hate to say it, but I wouldn’t.”

#### LOOK IT UP

The Indiana State Police maintains a database of properties where meth labs were seized. The database includes seizures since 2007 and properties are removed from the database within three months of being cleaned up. Access the database at <http://www.in.gov/meth/2371.htm>

#### WHAT IF I SUSPECT METH IS COOKING?

State police say if you suspect there’s illegal drug activity going on, do not enter a site that you think may be used for cooking meth. Instead, immediately call the Indiana State Police Meth Hotline at 1-800-453-4756.

Cass County Health Inspector Mike Collins says to stay away from certain kinds of litter on the side of the road, too, like pop bottles or backpacks — “if you ever find any 2-liter bottle, even a 16-ounce plastic bottle, leave that alone.” It could be contaminated by the one-pot method of cooking meth, he said.