



The Columbian

Program eyes cold pills used in meth State will use computer system to monitor sales

By [John Branton](#)
Columbian staff writer
Monday, May 3, 2010

How do you stop methamphetamine cooks from smurfing, which means visiting one store after another to buy way more than their legal limit of over-the-counter cold and allergy medicines containing pseudoephedrine?

Some smurfers buy the over-the-counter pills to cook small amounts of methamphetamine for themselves, police say. Others work for meth manufacturers who, in some areas, have hired homeless folks in droves and bused them from store to store.

A new method of controlling smurfing will be tried soon, under a recently passed Washington law that calls for real-time computer monitoring of cold pill sales in stores.

Currently in Washington state, folks have to show identification to buy pills containing pseudoephedrine, and employees log the sale. Some cold pills have been reformulated to omit the pseudoephedrine, which can be combined with other readily available substances to make methamphetamine.

Under the change, the new computer system would be aware of the first sale of pseudoephedrine-containing pills, and block any others under the buyer's name for a period of time.

"Real-time electronic logging of purchases is the most effective method to monitor precursor sales, because it can stop illegal sales automatically," Don Pierce, executive director of the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs, said in a bulletin on March 24, one day after Gov. Chris Gregoire signed the bill into law.

Washington now is the 10th state to approve the system, which is being provided free to states by major pharmaceutical companies.

The system has been recommended by the National Association of Drug Diversion Investigators, which seeks to prevent various medications from being diverted for illegal purposes.

The program, called the National Precursor Log Exchange, or NPLeX, was modeled after a system that worked successfully in Kentucky to fight home-cooked meth, the association says.

Police concerns

Cmdr. Rusty Warren with the Clark-Skamania Drug Task Force told The Columbian he has doubts whether the computer system will work as well as the task force's own proposal would have — to make pseudoephedrine pill purchases prescription-only, as they are in Oregon.

A weakness in the system, Warren said, is that smurfers sometimes carry IDs in several names.

In arrest after arrest of meth-using identity thieves in recent years, police have found phony driver's licenses and other cards, made using scanners, laminators and other equipment that's readily available in stores.

In a local blunder several years ago, a man went to prison after making a bogus Mastercard that read "Plotinum" instead of Platinum.

NPLEx would have trouble catching crooks with several convincing fake IDs, Warren said.

"They're able to still bypass the system," he said, adding, "It will be interesting to see how it all plays out."

Warren said the drug task force has busted only one local meth lab so far this year, and it was a small one that made only "user quantities," as opposed to much larger amounts some dealers would have.

These days the vast majority of meth that's flowing into Clark County isn't made locally, but is being brought here from large labs in California and Mexico that are mostly controlled by Mexican drug trafficking organizations, Warren said.

These days, he said, such organizations are selling meth to dealers here, and some members of the same groups are selling it at the street level.

When local narcotics officers have busted such groups here, many of those arrested have been in the United States illegally; several such defendants have been sentenced to prison by judges who ordered that, after their release, they were to be deported.

And those deported from this area have been known to come back.

Super labs on way?

Police call meth-cooking operations that can produce 10 or more pounds at a time super labs, and they mostly have operated in California or Mexico.

In the four years Warren has commanded the drug task force, his detectives haven't taken down a local super lab, but the big operations are coming closer.

Last month in Portland, a federal judge sentenced Jorge Ortiz-Oliva, 39, of Salem, who was convicted of being "the leader of a far-reaching drug conspiracy," to serve 30 years in federal prison, according to a bulletin from the U.S. Attorney's Office in Oregon.

For several years, the bulletin said, Ortiz-Oliva's organization cooked more than 10 pounds of meth at a time in super labs hidden in Marion County, Ore.

Before police busted the organization, officials said, it sold meth and cocaine — and marijuana that it grew on public lands and in national forests in remote areas of Jackson County, Ore., and elsewhere. The ring supplied drug traffickers in Washington, California, Nevada, Utah, Idaho, Arizona, Texas, Ohio, Rhode Island, Minnesota, Georgia and Massachusetts, the bulletin said.

In Clark County, police have considered meth the biggest problem among all illegal drugs for more than 25 years.

Although marijuana is the most prevalent illegal drug here, meth still has the greatest harmful impact on the community, Warren said.

It's been well documented how methamphetamine affects users' health, appearance and ability to hold jobs; their children and other family members; and the victims of crimes they commit to get the stimulant. It adds a big load to the local criminal justice system that spends taxpayers' money to investigate, arrest, and house and feed them in the jail — and to prosecute, defend and try them in court, over and over again.

In another trend, drug detectives are seeing an increase in the use of heroin here, including reports of high-school-age youths in the Battle Ground area smoking it in pipes, Warren said.

“The Battle Ground area seems to have a more noticeable problem, but it's across the county also,” Warren said.

Powdered cocaine also is making a comeback here, possibly because meth is so expensive, running about \$23,000 to \$25,000 per pound, Warren said.

John Branton: 360-735-4513 or john.branton@columbian.com.