

DRUG LABORATORIES

The number of clandestine drug laboratories has increased dramatically in recent years. The number of seizures, "busts", or "raids" made by law enforcement agencies has also increased. Clandestine drug laboratory investigations, seizures, and arrests of suspects are all Police Department or law enforcement agency matters. However, local law enforcement agencies are calling upon area Fire Department's Hazardous Material Response Teams for assistance during raids and for advice on safety matters.

POLICY

The Clay County Fire Department's will provide limited support for police departments and other agencies, when requested, at sites of clandestine drug laboratories. Support may consist of, but is not limited to: providing research and information on chemicals that are suspected or are known to be in the laboratory, remote exterior air monitoring, and decontamination of police entry personnel.

HAZARDS

Substitution of proper equipment with unsafe items is prevalent in low budget clandestine laboratory operations. For example, pressure cookers have been substituted for three neck flasks in the initial cooking stage of methamphetamine. Without ventilation, this type of operation can easily generate toxic levels of phosphine gas.

Booby traps have been left in place and armed when a lab is abandoned. Opening or moving doors, windows, refrigerator

doors, chemical containers, or furniture may be a triggering mechanism for an explosive device or chemical reaction that is lethal. Trip wires made from monofilament fishing line may be strung across doorways, hallways, or across rooms to activate different types of devices. **It is imperative that nothing is moved, shut off, turned on, or touched, at a laboratory, whether it is operational or abandoned.** Electric switches, vacuum pumps, glassware, chemical containers, or anything that is plugged into a wall outlet should not be touched. Water sources, especially to reflux or condensing towers, should not be touched. Water sources, especially to reflux or condensing towers, should not be shut off. Shutting off the water supply to a cooking process can result in an explosion.

INDICATORS

Personnel should be aware of the indications of potential clandestine drug laboratories when responding to EMS, fire, check odor, or another service request. Common indicators are:

- Unusual odors like ether, acetic, solvents, and odors of urea.
- Glassware that is normally associated with school or industrial laboratories, such as flasks, beakers, flasks with vacuum ports, glass cooling towers, and funnels.
- Heating elements, hot plates, or heating mantles.
- Vacuum pumps, plastic or rubber tubing.
- Marked and unmarked chemical containers of various sizes.

SUSPECTED DRUG LABORATORY OPERATION - NOTIFICATION PROCESS

Personnel that encounter a suspected laboratory should withdraw to a safe location as soon as it is possible, using discretion on actions and radio conversation. The Fire Chief and Police Department should be notified of the situation. If a situation warrants additional immediate action (e.g. evacuation of surrounding areas, several victims, a chemical release or spill), Fire Alarm should be requested to dispatch the appropriate level of a hazardous materials assignment.

TACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The recognition of the presence of a clandestine drug laboratory that is involved in a fire typically does not occur until after fire control has been achieved. The initial indications of the presence of a laboratory may be subtle or very apparent. Depending on the products involved, a fire in a lab can spread faster and burn with more intensity than what might normally be expected. The color of the flames may appear to be an unusually bright or dark orange, or the flames may be of several different colors. An unusual color of smoke or odor may also be present.

A laboratory that is involved in a fire situation should be viewed pessimistically by Command. Command should request Fire Alarm to dispatch the balance of the appropriate level of a hazardous materials assignment. A defensive mode may be appropriate for personnel safety. Standard protective clothing and SCBA use may not afford complete protection. An acceptable alternative is to protect any exposures and allow the fire to burn, providing the products of combustion being generated are not complicating the problem further. Run-off may also create a problem and diking may be necessary.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Personnel showing any signs or symptoms of a chemical exposure during or after any incident involving a laboratory or a

suspected laboratory should be treated and transported to the Hospital. All potentially exposed personnel and equipment must be considered contaminated. Exposed equipment, especially protective clothing, may have to be properly disposed of. Notification to hospital of exposed victims being transported must be made.

ENTRY

The Clay County Fire Department's personnel will not participate in a law enforcement agency entry operation into a suspected and unsecured clandestine drug laboratory. Security shall mean that the Police Department and Bomb Squad teams have surveyed the area and all suspects are in custody, and confirmation that the building has been searched and no explosive devices were found. The Clay County Fire Department's personnel may make an entry into a secured drug laboratory if an emergency situation involving hazardous materials develops **and if the safety of the Clay County Fire Department's personnel is not jeopardized.**

ADDITIONAL FIRE DEPARTMENT RESOURCE

Additional resource requirements needed at the site will be determined by the Fire Chief. A multi-company response will cause the activation of the incident command system.

DISPOSAL

Proper disposal of the hazardous material(s) in a clandestine laboratory is the responsibility of the law enforcement agency that is making the seizure.