

Meth Lab Training for First Responders

The bottle sits by the side of the road in the sunlight, looking, at first glance, like the other roadside debris thoughtless drivers throw away. On second glance, it appears to contain some nameless substance, neither the soda that originally filled it, nor water that someone used to refill it. But that substance isn't nameless. It has a name: shake and bake meth. And it's been left by the roadside for a short time to "cook" — and possibly explode.

This "quick and easy" method of making the illegal methamphetamine has been a law enforcement issue for the past 10 years. Earlier this year, staff from the States, Major Cities and Counties (SMCC) Regional Center provided a course aimed at helping other public safety professionals — firefighters and emergency medical services personnel — recognize the bottles as well, and know when to stay away and call their law enforcement partners to help them handle a Hazmat scene.

SMCC is part of the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center (NLECTC) System, a program of the Office of Justice Programs' National Institute of Justice. SMCC Assistant Director Scott Barker brought a background as an FBI agent, a former drug task force member and a volunteer firefighter to developing "When Your Fire Scene Becomes a Crime Scene: Meth Labs and the Fire Service," a free two- to three-hour training first presented at the Daniel Boone Firefighters Association Annual Training Conference in Morehead, Ky., in May 2012.

Within weeks of that initial training, Barker had received more than a dozen requests to repeat the training elsewhere in the region, and had made plans to share his outline and training materials with public safety professionals from other areas of the country so they can create their own versions of the training if one doesn't already exist. The session has the following objectives:

- Educating first responders on the signs of the meth user.
- Recognizing a clandestine meth lab, especially the one-step (shake and bake) method, and knowing the importance of alerting law enforcement on finding a suspected lab.
- Using proper protective equipment.

- Decontaminating the meth patient.
- Following hospital protocols.

Barker's training also includes a brief overview of the NLECTC System and how it can help law enforcement professionals and other public safety professionals.

"The course shows them the dangers they might find in a lab and what signs to look for, such as lithium strips taken from batteries, kerosene and of course pseudoephedrine," Barker says. "If a guy says to them, 'It was just a little fire, it's out, and I'll just wait outside while you check it out,' go outside too and wait for law enforcement personnel who are trained in dealing with meth labs. It emphasizes the importance of wearing proper equipment, especially respirators, and how to handle possibly contaminated patients."

Barker explains that the "soda bottle labs" are especially dangerous because the plastic containers are designed to hold beverages, not combustible chemicals.

"It's easy to make it this way but incredibly more dangerous," he says. A video posted on YouTube by the Tulsa (Okla.) Police Department shows just how easily these bottles can explode, even in trained hands (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnT2jfgSIII>). In fact, so many of these bottles explode and cause serious injuries, it resembles an epidemic that could potentially overwhelm the nation's burn centers, according to an article in *medicaldaily.com* (<http://www.medicaldaily.com/news/20120123/8873/tax-payer-shake-and-bake-meth-methamphetamine-meth-lab-basement-shed-drug-illegal-police-h.htm>).

"I've taught courses on meth lab awareness for law enforcement before, but this time the focus is on first responders so they can learn how fire scenes turn into crime scenes, and how they should work together with law enforcement," Barker says. "We wanted to remind them that even though they might have Hazmat training, they aren't meth lab techs. They should call in law enforcement and let them handle it. There's a direct benefit to law enforcement as well in that the first responders learn how to better protect evidence."

The initial response to the training has been so strong that the Kentucky State Fire Commission is considering offering the class on a continuing basis with hazardous materials credit.

“It’s not like we’re offering training on something that has a 1 percent chance of happening. They’re going to see it. It’s probably already in their community,” Barker says.

For more information on “When Your Fire Scene Becomes a Crime Scene: Meth Labs and the Fire Service,” contact the SMCC at (800) 248-2742 or asknlectc@justnet.org. For more information on the programs of the SMCC Regional Center, visit <http://www.justnet.org> or contact NIJ Program Manager Michael O’Shea at (202) 305-7954 or michael.oshea@usdoj.gov.



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