

Medicinal Tracking Going Online

Sheriff's Office Effort Takes Aim At Local Meth Making

By David Reynolds

Posted 2007-11-12

The Rockingham County Sheriff's Office will soon use a computer database to track the sale of cold medicines that contain chemicals used to make methamphetamine, officials say.

The new program — Meth-Check — will link 17 pharmacies in Rockingham and possibly in neighboring counties in a network that will record sales of medicines containing pseudoephedrine.

Sheriff Don Farley said his office would be the first in Virginia to take part in the pilot program.

Federal law already requires pharmacists to record sales of certain cold medicines and to make their logs available for police review. The new computer system, set to start early next year, will streamline that process, Farley said.

"We're going to have 17 different pharmacies, where any time of the day, we can look and see what transactions are taking place with these drugs," he said. "It's another evidence gathering tool for us in the fight against [meth]."

The Problem And The Plan

While the startup program will pay for scanners in Rockingham County, pharmacies in Page and Warren counties will be asked to participate in the network, Farley said.

The program is another step in an ongoing effort to reduce domestic manufacture of meth, police say.

In 2005, Congress passed the Combat Methamphetamine Act, limiting the how much pseudoephedrine a person can buy. It also required purchasers to show ID and sign a ledger.

But Supervisory Special Agent Tom Murphy, of the RUSH Drug Task Force, says that meth makers started traveling in groups, going from pharmacy to pharmacy buying the medicines.

Police call the ruse "smurfing," Murphy says. And while it can be detected, police must now travel long distances, checking ledgers to catch it, he said.

Meth-Check will allow police to catch "smurfers" using fewer resources, Murphy said.

"It's taking the current laws a step further," he said. "It's nice having [sales] documented in a notebook but it will be better on a computer."

Murphy also said he would like legislators to require all pharmacists to use the database.

But he also said the tracking system isn't likely to put a big dent in the local meth trade. That's because only 2 percent of meth seized in the Valley is produced here.

But, Murphy and Farley say that any reduction in meth production is a good thing.

"If we're able to bust up one of the local labs we have" it's a success, Farley said. "We do have a drug problem and with that I would suspect we have labs that go undetected."