

Tempe Fire Department Policies and Procedures
Clandestine Drug Laboratories
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SCOPE

Clandestine laboratory production of illicit drugs has proliferated in recent years. Considerable profit margins with little risk of detection have contributed to the increased number of laboratories. Laboratories can be found anywhere ranging in size from portable to elaborate fixed sites. The number of seizures, "busts," or "raids," made by law enforcement agencies have also increased. Clandestine drug laboratory investigations, seizures, and arrests of suspects are all law enforcement agency matters.

Several law enforcement personnel have experienced health problems that are related to a lack of personnel protective equipment during raids of clandestine drug laboratories. Most law enforcement agencies are now concerned with providing for the safety of their personnel making the raids and are becoming more informed on the safety requirements that OSHA law 29 CFR 1910 has on their operations at clandestine drug laboratory raids. Law enforcement agencies are also utilizing fire department hazardous incident response teams for assistance during raids and for advice on safety matters.

The various types of hazards associated with the chemicals used, the lack of safety control systems, the lack of knowledge on the part of the cookers, and the potential for "booby traps" make a clandestine drug laboratory an extremely dangerous situation for fire department personnel. Clandestine drug laboratories may be encountered as a result of several different types of incidents at the lab or in the immediate area, e.g., EMS incidents at the lab, an odor in the area, structure fires, etc.

It has been estimated that only 5% of the lab operators have a chemistry background. The other 95% percent have learned their procedures from "on-the-job training." The lab operator is typically referred to as the "cooker." Cookers generally have very little knowledge of the hazards and proper disposal methods of the chemicals that they work with. Flammable liquids, flammable gases, corrosives, water reactives, and poisons are all used in manufacturing processes of illicit drugs. Safety control systems are generally not used. Very few clandestine labs have ventilation systems. Those that do have ventilation systems use the systems for odor removal in order to avoid detection.

Personnel must be aware of the indications of a potential clandestine laboratory. Some of the common indicators are:

- . Unusual odors, especially odors that smell like ether, biting odors that are acetic, heavy solvent odors, and odors of stale urine.
- . Glassware that is normally associated with school or industry laboratories, i.e., flasks, beakers, flasks with vacuum ports, reflux or condensing towers, three neck flasks, separating funnels, etc.
- . Heating elements, hot plates, or heating mantles.
- . Vacuum pumps and plastic or rubber tubing.
- . Marked and unmarked chemical containers of various sizes.

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

Cookers will acquire their chemicals and hardware in any manner that they can, including stealing the chemicals from other labs. To prevent the loss of chemicals and hardware, operational labs may be "booby trapped." If

"booby traps" are used in a lab, generally the cooker will activate the "booby traps" when a lab is left unattended or 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, chemical containers, glassware, or anything that is plugged into a wall outlet 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.

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 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 the Alarm Room to dispatch the balance of the appropriate level of a hazardous incident assignment. A defensive mode may be appropriate for personnel safety. 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. Command should also request the response of the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) Emergency Response Division, the Police Department, and City Wastewater for assistance.

POLICY

Personnel that encounter a suspected laboratory should withdraw to a safe location as soon as possible using discretion on actions and conversation. The on-duty deputy chief and the Police Department are to 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), the Alarm Room should be requested to dispatch the appropriate level of a hazardous incident assignment.

All potentially exposed personnel and equipment must be decontaminated. Personnel showing any signs or symptoms of a chemical exposure during or after an incident involving a laboratory or a suspected laboratory should be treated and transported to Poison Control, providing that the situation is not life-threatening. Life-threatening injuries require transport to the closest hospital. All potentially exposed personnel should complete a Hazardous Materials Exposure Report Form. Exposed equipment, especially protective clothing, may have to be professionally cleaned or properly disposed of.

The Tempe Fire Department Hazardous Incident Response Team will provide support for police departments and state agencies, when requested, at sites of clandestine drug laboratories. Support may consist of, but is not limited to, research of chemicals that are suspected or are known to be in the laboratory, providing personal protective equipment, remote exterior air monitoring, and decontamination of police entry personnel.

GUIDELINES

Any agency that requests the Hazardous Incident Response Team for assistance during a seizure of a clandestine drug laboratory should contact the on-duty deputy chief for scheduling of the Hazardous Incident Response Team. The agency that is requesting the assistance should provide information on location, time, staging area, and the type of assistance that is needed. If possible, a pre-incident meeting should be scheduled between the agency and the Hazardous Incident Response Team company officer(s) to address the concerns noted above.

Tempe Fire Department personnel will not participate in any law enforcement agency entry into a known and unsecured clandestine drug laboratory. Tempe Fire Department HIRT personnel may make an entry into a secured clandestine drug laboratory if an emergency situation involving hazardous materials develops and if the safety of Tempe Fire Department personnel is not placed in jeopardy.

Prior to taking any actions at a suspected clandestine drug laboratory, the Tempe Fire Department will request the response of a representative from the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) Emergency Response Division. If a representative from DEQ is unable to respond directly to the location of the incident, every effort will be made to contact a representative by telephone to inform them of the situation.

In compliance with OSHA law 49 CFR 925, the Tempe Fire Department will not remove or dispose of any hazardous materials associated with a clandestine drug laboratory. Proper disposal of the hazardous materials in a clandestine drug laboratory is the responsibility of the law enforcement agency that is making the seizure.