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**HEADLINE: Countering meth incursion in Md.;  
As drug creeps in, DEA teaches police how to deal with labs**

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**DATELINE: QUANTICO, VA.**

**BODY:**

**QUANTICO, VA.** -- In World War II-era Quonset huts deep inside this sprawling Marine Corps base, two Harford County sheriff's deputies spent a week learning how to cook methamphetamine.

The illegal drug recipe isn't hard or especially secret. The primary ingredients are cold medicine, denatured alcohol, phosphorus, reagents and iodine.

"It's not rocket science," Deputy 1st Class Greg Young said.

Still, for the 35-year-old deputy, the final white powdery product was striking to see for the first time. Young wants to be able to recognize the ingredients of a drug that has been popping up in his largely rural county with increasing frequency.

The deputies' cooking instruction came as part of an effort by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration to train authorities across Maryland and other states to identify, dismantle and secure clandestine methamphetamine labs.

Last year, police officers in Maryland discovered nine such sites, up from two the year before.

While not nearly the same crisis as in the West and Midwest - more than 12,000 meth labs were discovered nationwide last year, according to the DEA - drug experts statewide report that the meth lab phenomenon has moved east and may be establishing a foothold in Maryland.

This year, labs were found in Montgomery and Garrett counties.

And Friday, on the same day Young and Sgt. Doug Reppar graduated from their weeklong meth lab course in Quantico, prosecutors hauled three people into federal court after a routine traffic stop led to the discovery of a makeshift meth lab at a Super 8 Motel in Joppa.

## Little education

Authorities in Maryland acknowledge that they have few officers who know how to deal with the problem. Only four students from local and state law enforcement in Maryland completed the 40-hour clandestine lab course last year.

"In the beginning, a course like this was just for us," said John M. Donnelly, unit chief of the DEA clandestine lab training.

But because the labs can be highly toxic and volatile, federal drug officials believe that local authorities nationwide need to know how to recognize and contain them. This fiscal year, 15 more students from Maryland have been certified by the DEA meth lab experts.

The telltale signs are strange. A room littered with cold medicine, camera batteries or containers of lye could be a giveaway of a meth lab, Donnelly said.

The dangers inside the room, he said, are significant. Cooking meth can produce deadly fumes that are colorless and odorless. The likelihood of explosions from unstable gases contained in gas grill tanks is high, Donnelly said.

For the students who complete his course, the DEA provides more than \$2,000 worth of hazardous material protection gear, including chemical suits, bulletproof vests and protective masks.

Instructors discuss the toxicology of the drug in a classroom lined with pictures of lab operators who have been injured or died during meth production accidents.

## Dangerous duty

Unlike in their approach to most crime scenes, Donnelly said, officers must plan to detain suspects, guard against the risk of fire and protect themselves from the dangers of chemical exposure.

Cleaning up labs in places as different as a motel room and a U-Haul truck requires a contractor specializing in toxic waste. Estimates average \$2,500, Donnelly said, and \$20 million was spent nationwide last year.

"About 30 percent of all labs are found because there is some kind of fire or explosion," he said.

Between 2000 and late last year, more than 15,000 children were exposed to meth labs, including thousands exposed to the toxic chemicals. There were also 96 lab-related injuries and eight deaths, according to a report issued last week by the family advocacy group Generations United.

The meth problem in Maryland remains small, fed by outside influences, authorities said.

In the most recent example, on Thursday, one of the lead investigators had completed the meth lab course in Quantico. Baltimore Officer Steven Rose, who is assigned to a DEA task force,

noted the course in his affidavit before a federal court judge Friday, as he sought drug charges against three people from North Carolina.

### Gathering ingredients

According to court documents, a Harford County sheriff's deputy arrested a driver, Valerie A. James, 25, on suspicion of driving under the influence. A search of the car recovered a small quantity of methamphetamine and a propane-style tank containing anhydrous ammonia, according to court papers.

Court papers stated that James told authorities she and two friends from North Carolina were traveling to New York and stopped in Harford County to rest. Throughout the day they had been purchasing pseudo-ephedrine - a common ingredient in cold medicine - in Maryland and Virginia, according to the papers.

Police searching their room at the Super 8 Motel on Pulaski Highway in Joppa found lithium strips, at least two 1-gallon containers of Coleman fuel and more than 200 tablets of pseudoephedrine, according to court documents.

All the items, Rose wrote, could be used to cook meth.

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