METH TAKES HOLD OF TEXAS – BUT COUNTIES FIGHTING BACK

By Jennifer Acosta Scott

It isn't hard for Lt. Jay Whitney to spot a methamphetamine addict among the inmates at the Grayson County Jail.

In his two-decade law enforcement career with the Grayson County Sheriff's Office, Whitney has learned the subtle nuances that distinguish run-of-the-mill druggies from those on "ice" or "crank," as the drug is commonly called on the streets. Profuse sweating is a dead giveaway, as are rotting teeth and grayish skin.

"They've generally got picking marks all over them," said Whitney, who heads up the county's narcotics investigation division. "They've probably lost several pounds since the last time we saw them. Having been here 21 years now, I know most of them."

As well he should. Though Grayson County is smaller than most metro areas – only about 115,000 residents – its meth problem is big. In 2000, the county received the dubious distinction of uncovering more drug labs than any other county in Texas. Just a few weeks into 2005, Whitney and his officers had already busted two meth-manufacturing operations. But Grayson County's problem is becoming the rule rather than the exception. As ways to make the drug become easier and cheaper, meth is slowly spreading its addictive tentacles to all corners of Texas – leaving local sheriffs and district attorneys to pick up the pieces.

Most commonly seen as a fine white powder or clear crystals, methamphetamine is a stimulant that acts on the central nervous system, often causing violence, psychosis and self-destruction. Even the briefest of looks at statistics makes it clear that the drug has a firm hold on Texas. From 2003 to mid-2004, 577 kilograms of methamphetamine were seized in Texas – a 157 percent increase from 2002 (but still significantly less than California, which seized 1,572 kilograms during the same time frame). According to a summary from the Drug Enforcement Administration, Texas' well-developed highways and proximity to the Mexican border make it a favorite route for international drug traffickers, who transport meth along with heroin and other illicit substances. But much of the meth in Texas is produced by "home cooks" – penny-ante manufacturers who use crude equipment and everyday materials to churn out small batches of the drug in their homes or out-of-the-way shacks. Its ease of production is one of its most attractive qualities, and one of the most frustrating for law enforcement.

"These guys are smart," said Nueces County Sheriff Larry Olivarez. "They move the labs around so people won't get suspicious. But some of the ones we've taken down have been in neighborhoods."

Meth is also infamous for wreaking physical havoc on its users. Meth addicts often stay awake for days at a time and rarely eat; the overstimulation caused by the drug can induce repetitive motions like scratching, and addicts are unlikely to care about much else.

"They'll grind their teeth down to the gums," said Grayson County Sheriff Keith Gary. "The women that come into our jail…have every STD (Sexually Transmitted Disease) known to man."

For meth addicts with kids, the consequences are even more troubling. Jackie McMillon, director of Harris County's Children's Crisis Care Center, said approximately 90 percent of the cases that come through her office are connected in some way to drug or alcohol abuse. Often, the children of addicted parents are shuffled in and out of foster homes, and the constant upheaval can cause deep emotional scars.

"When you think of how drugs interfere with parenting, and ultimately children being separated from their parents because of it – it's more than you can wrap your mind around," McMillon said.

For this reason, McMillon said, her department often refers families to counseling, where children can express their frustrations about the situation and parents can learn the reasons behind their

drug addiction.

"Until you get to the bottom of the matter, you're going to have parents that are going to use again and again and again," McMillon said.

While McMillon and other county social workers deal with the emotional fallout from methamphetamine addiction, state and local officials hope new measures and smart strategies will loosen the drug's hold over Texas. Many believe the uptick in Texas meth labs was caused by a new Oklahoma law that restricts the sale of pseudoephedrine, an essential ingredient in meth recipes and a common component in cold medications. Under the new law, Oklahoma consumers must now present a photo ID and sign a register when buying pseudoephedrine-containing medications. They are also limited to purchasing 9 grams of pseudoephedrine every 30 days. The new regulations have caused a dramatic decrease in Oklahoma meth-lab raids – and some suspect the drug operations are now moving south to Texas.

Tim Cole, who serves as district attorney for Montague, Clay and Archer counties, said he supports the passage of a law similar to Oklahoma's, which could force meth suppliers to set up shop in other states.

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Such a measure could soon find itself up for consideration in the state Legislature. Tyler State Rep. Leo Berman has announced plans to pursue a bill that would restrict pseudoephedrine sales and increase jail time for methamphetamine-related crimes. If the bill passes, it could relieve the state's meth problem – but it could also increase stress on counties' jail systems. Berman told the *Tyler Morning Telegraph* in November that he is looking for space in county jails to hold the backlog of prisoners that might be created by the stiffer sentencing guidelines.

"We're not going to worry about bed space," Berman told the newspaper. "We'll make the accommodations."

Cole said another approach may be to find non-jail treatment programs for methamphetamine addicts, such as the state-run Substance Abuse and Felony Prevention Program (SAFP). However, Cole added, the waiting lists for these programs are long, and many inmates are paroled before they can get in, leaving them free to cook meth again.

Community partnerships with sheriffs' departments can also be effective in curbing the spread of methamphetamine. Whitney said he has had some success working with retailers and convincing them to stop selling products that make meth. One grocery store even stopped carrying lye and matchbooks, he said. Many merchants are more than willing to make such concessions, Whitney explained, because they usually value the business of their consistent customers over occasional purchases from meth cooks, whose haggard appearance often frightens their clientele.

"Mrs. Smith spends half her Social Security check in here to a tune of $100 a month, but the [addict] that comes in here every four or five weeks to buy matches…how many Mrs. Smiths is he running off?" Whitney asked.

If merchants are reluctant to alter their inventory, Olivarez of Nueces County said these retailers can be taught to look out for unusual purchases, like large amounts of cold medicine. Many methamphetamine labs have been taken down through such tips from the business community, Olivarez said.

Education of parents can also be an effective tool in helping stop the spread of methamphetamine, said Tyler County Sheriff Jessie Wolf, particularly among young adults. The drug goes by at least 20 vague nicknames, and it's easy to hide in a backpack – so parents often don't realize that their children are buying or making drugs until it's too late.

"A lot wouldn't know meth, or crack, if you threw it in their face," Wolf said.

Wolf said efficient scheduling of his officers has enabled him to make a dent in the county's meth labs, even though he only has 10 deputies. Everyone works narcotics cases, Wolf said, and when an officer is pursuing a hot lead, his colleagues will often take over his normal patrol duties.

"We just try to get through it, and try to work around it the best way we can."

Whitney said strategic investigation of every meth-related arrest can also help bring down major meth suppliers. Often, people who are caught with small amounts of meth can be convinced to give up the name of their dealer in exchange for a lighter punishment. This approach helps law enforcement go straight to the source of the problem while spending far fewer hours on investigation.

"[We tell them] 'If you want to help yourself out, give me a bigger fish,'" Whitney said.

Despite the vigorous efforts of local officials to eradicate – or at least retard – the meth epidemic in Texas, the road is becoming ever more difficult to negotiate. Once found mainly in rural areas, methamphetamine labs are now moving into urban territory as more sophisticated processes are invented to mask the drug's telltale smell. According to an October article from the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, more and more operations are being discovered in suburban homes and hotels, increasing the risk of explosions and fires. The tide, McMillon said, never seems to ebb.

"That's probably been the biggest piece of our work this year – trying to figure out where to get families for service, there being enough services available," McMillon said. "There never seems to be enough."

A key factor in combating the epidemic, Cole said, is for both law enforcement and community members to change the way they think about drug crime. Drug criminals are no longer cash-laden, beeper-wearing moguls.

"The picture that we had of a drug dealer 20 years ago is not accurate anymore," Cole said. "Now it's a guy with no teeth in a '72 van with just enough cash to make his next batch of dope." ★