The fight against meth

States work together to combat Midwest’s rising drug problem

by Ilene K. Grossman

Faced with large increases in methamphetamine production and use, states in the Midwest have stepped up efforts to combat a problem that is causing great alarm among law enforcement and prevention and treatment specialists.

This region has been especially hard hit by the nationwide meth scourge. From Kansas, which ranks fourth in the nation in meth lab seizures, to Ohio, where a recent state attorney general’s office survey concluded that labs were spreading at a disturbing rate, leaders are fighting a drug battle that poses a unique set of challenges.

States are working both individually and collectively on the problem. In September, the Midwestern Governors’ Conference convened a meth summit in Sioux City, Iowa. As Hutchinson, director of the Drug Enforcement Administration, told participants that nearly 5,200 labs were seized in the Midwest last year. One reason for the rise in meth labs is that they are quite profitable — a $1,000 investment can yield a $20,000 profit. In addition, the drug is relatively easy to make.

Meth is highly addictive, and addicts often become violent and unpredictable; a growing number of arrestees are testing positive for the drug. For example, in Polk County, Iowa, 15.3 percent of men and women who were arrested in 2000 tested positive for meth. In the third quarter of 2001, that number rose to 38.5 percent.

The county’s female arrestees now have begun to test positive for meth at a higher rate than men. And the state as a whole has seen a major increase in the number of female meth abusers, a particularly troubling trend because women are usually the primary caregivers to children.

Recipes for meth, also sometimes called crank, are available on the Internet, and the ingredients can be purchased cheaply, easily and legally. An exhibit table at the MGC summit displayed all of the ingredients needed to produce the drug; they were lawfully purchased in less than an hour for under $100.

An alternative method for producing meth requires the use of anhydrous ammonia, a common fertilizer. While this ingredient cannot readily be purchased in small amounts, so-called “meth cooks” have been able to tap into tanks located in rural areas throughout the Midwest.

North Dakota Rep. Duane DeKrey says his state has seen a large increase in the number of meth labs. In 2001, fewer than 90 were seized in the state. “According to the Bureau of Criminal Investigation, so far this year, over 200 labs have been discovered,” adds DeKrey, a Republican from Pettibone, who attended the most recent MGC summit.

Every state in the Midwest has areas well suited for meth production. DeKrey points out that abandoned farmsteads and homes make it easy to hide the labs. The number of isolated or abandoned homes and the distance between them pose a real challenge for police, as does the fact that law enforcement capabilities are often limited in agricultural regions.

While rural areas provide easy places to make the drug, it can be produced nearly anywhere. Labs have been discovered in motel rooms and in state parks. They also are often located in freestanding homes. At the MGC summit, Iowa Democratic Gov. Tom Vilsack told participants that in one case in Iowa, baby slippers and a doll were found in a home being used as a meth lab.

“The minds of the people in that house had been so warped by addiction that they carelessly allowed their children to play in a meth lab,” Vilsack said. Summit attendees also learned that children were discovered in 90 percent of the meth labs seized in Oklahoma City last year.

The labs are an environmental hazard as well.

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States trying new ways to eradicate meth labs, treat addicts

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Every pound of meth produced yields between 5 and 6 pounds of toxic waste. Of the 32 chemicals used in various combinations to produce meth, one-third are extremely toxic. Together, these chemicals pose dangers to the people producing the drug, to those living in the lab or nearby and to law enforcement officials.

What states can do
The ultimate way to control meth abuse is through prevention. The challenge for health officials, educators and others is to convince both children and parents about the dangers of meth. But as long as a demand for the drug exists, officials also will focus on stopping production.

Most states are making the ingredients for meth more difficult to obtain by educating retailers. Bulk or frequent purchases of otherwise common products such as batteries, lantern fuel, and cold or allergy tablets containing pseudoephedrine are telltale signs. State officials are seeking to get retailers to either voluntarily limit sales of these products or to report to law enforcement such purchases. There are already some federal restrictions on sales of certain over-the-counter products, and states can opt for stricter limitations.

“Strong enforcement is essential until demand for the drug can be eroded,” says Bruce Upchurch, director of the Governor’s Office of Drug Control Policy in Iowa and chair of the MGC’s Methamphetamine Task Force.

Law enforcement has found that many labs are run by repeat offenders or by people with connections to other labs. In response, Iowa has successfully utilized special meth lab teams to focus on these repeat offenders. They also have been able to conduct proactive investigations, rather than simply respond to discoveries of clandestine labs.

Because it is easier to produce meth using anhydrous ammonia, several states are providing assistance to farmers to lock up their anhydrous tanks. In some cases, federal money has been procured to provide locks for farmers. States also are strengthening laws related to this much-used fertilizer. For example, last year, Wisconsin passed legislation that increased penalties for the theft of, improper storage of or damage to anhydrous ammonia tanks when used to manufacture meth. In addition, Wisconsin provides civil liability protections to agricultural users of anhydrous ammonia from people injured trying to steal the chemical.

Along with attempts to curb use and production, Midwestern policymakers also must deal with the challenges related to the treatment of meth addiction. Nebraska Republican Gov. Mike Johanns, chair of the MGC, cites studies that indicate meth addiction demands longer inpatient treatment periods than other drug dependencies.

“Lengthier and more intensive treatment will slow the revolving door of recidivism that plagues meth users,” he told fellow participants at the summit. However, the effective treatment of meth addiction will put increasing demands on all aspects of the health care system.

States have had some success in responding to meth addiction through the use of drug courts. There are approximately 700 drug courts in operation today in the United States, including ones for adults, juveniles and families; another 400 are in the planning process.

The courts oversee an extensive supervision and treatment program for drug-addicted offenders. They require offenders to make frequent court appearances, submit to regular drug tests, and undergo long-term counseling and treatment.

Those who successfully complete a drug court program may have charges against them dismissed, sentences set aside or penalties reduced.

The expenses incurred by the intensive oversight and treatment can be offset by reduced recidivism rates and shorter jail time. A 1998 study showed that $10 was saved for every $1 spent on drug courts.

Upchurch notes that five of Iowa’s eight judicial districts now have drug courts, which are funded by a combination of federal and state dollars. Most of the clients in Iowa’s drug court programs are meth abusers.

Results of the summit
The recent MGC summit resulted from the work of the Methamphetamine Task Force, which was formed several years ago by the region’s governors and provides a forum for states to work cooperatively as they attempt to address the meth problem.

“Cooperation of law enforcement agencies among summit states must continue if we are to defeat the problems of illicit distribution and assist each other in the discovery and disposal of clandestine drug production labs,” Johanns said in his opening remarks at the summit, which also was organized and sponsored by the National Crime Prevention Council, the DEA, and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services at the U.S. Department of Justice.

The governors’ meeting, in addition to promoting interstate cooperation, also highlighted the fact that dealing with meth production and abuse involves many state agencies. Governors designated officials with responsibilities for law enforcement, child protection, environmental cleanup, prevention and treatment to participate in state teams at the summit. Participants identified strategic challenges and opportunities related to their efforts to eradicate meth.

The meth task force of the MGC (which is staffed by the Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments) plans to build on the information gathered and shared at the recent summit. In the fight against meth production and use, Midwestern states will use all the assistance they can get, including from each other.