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Bill Coye (left), owner of Apex BioClean, and Deanna Hamlin remove carpet from a suspected methamphetamine lab in an Okmulgee County home. A proposed law would require landlords to clean a residence that previously housed a meth lab.



Renters face menace of meth

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Legislation being drafted for consideration in the upcoming session would require landlords to clean homes that were once the sites of methamphetamine labs before renting out the residences.

The proposed bill, initiated by Sen. Roger Ballenger, D-Okmulgee, is still undergoing revisions and is expected to be submitted by Thursday.

The measure is the result of an interim study involving the Department of Environmental Quality and other experts in the field of hazardous material remediation.

The study found that even after a meth lab has been dismantled by authorities, chemical residue on the walls and other surfaces in the structure that contained the lab could have long-term effects on people who later live there, said Bill Coye, owner of Apex Bioclean remediation company and a participant in the study.

Under current state law, a person selling a house must inform the buyer if a meth lab was ever on the property.

However, the state does not require landlords to clean a residence that previously housed a meth lab or tell renters that a lab had been located there.

"If I want to rent you a house, not only do I

not have to clean it, I don't even have to tell you about it," Coye said.

Until 2004, Oklahoma law enforcement officers were busting hundreds of residential meth labs each year.

After a law went into effect in 2004 requiring that pseudoephedrine be kept behind pharmacy counters and that customers sign for the purchase of drugs containing the key meth ingredient, the number of meth labs in the state declined significantly.

But not all of the chemicals used in the production of meth disappear when police remove the lab. Toxic

chemicals can stick to walls, appliances, ceilings, fans and almost any surface in a house, Coye said.

"This is a witch's brew deposited on the walls of houses," he said.

Little research has been done on the long-term, low-dose effects on the human body of chemicals used in meth labs, according to the National Alliance for Model State Drug Laws. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that such exposure can lead to cancer as well as to kidney, liver and other health problems, according to local, state and federal agencies that deal with meth labs.

The residual chemicals, some of which are carcinogenic, don't affect the human body all at once, said Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics spokesman Mark Woodward. Rather, they are akin to a slow poisoning.

"The more you breathe this, the more damage can occur," he said. "A lot of people think that if they can't smell it, it's safe and OK to inhabit, but what the experts tell us is that it can saturate into porous surfaces."

The first to feel the effects of the chemicals are children and pets, both Coye and Woodward said.

"The children are really the canary in the coal mine," Coye said. "They're the ones you see the effects in first."

Children are more apt to be affected first because their metabolisms operate faster and they're lower to the ground, where the chemicals' concentrations can be higher, Woodward said.

"A lot of parents have dismissed it (symptoms) as allergies or other illnesses when it could be something more serious," he said.

"These homes need to be tested by a professional to know whether the structure is safe to reinhabit," he said.

Remediation isn't cheap, and that is often a reason houses aren't properly cleaned and renters aren't informed that a house was once home to a meth lab.

"Our fear is that a lot of people are side-stepping that by throwing on a coat of paint and renting the houses out," Woodward said.

The process of cleaning a house that once contained a meth lab is not easy, Coye said. It involves the use of industrial degreasers, pressure washers and chemical compounds, as well as lots of elbow grease.

"We have to clean every square inch of the interior of the property," Coye said.

Painting the walls to try to cover the chemicals just makes remediation harder, he said. The chemicals can come through certain types of paint, and either the paint must be stripped off or the drywall must be removed, he said.

Coye said he hopes rules are implemented to require that chemicals be removed to 0.1 micrograms per 100 square centimeters, the standard that many states -- and his company -- use. That amount is roughly equal to a package of Sweet'N Low dissolved evenly over 2-1/2 football fields.

Tulsa Police Officer Leland Ashley said a law requiring that landlords clean a former meth house before it is rented would help keep people safe.

"On the whole, it would be a good law from a public-health, public-safety standpoint," he said. "Individuals who might be renting those properties -- who knows what kind of long-term effects it could have on an individual if the area has not been cleaned up."

Ballenger and Sen. Don Barrington, R-Lawton, co-chairmen of the Senate's Public Safety and Homeland Security Committee, both said they support legislation to require homes that were once lab sites be cleaned before a renter moves in.

If passed, the bill would require landlords to clean property to Department of Environmental Quality standards, Ballenger said.

"This isn't new. We're coming off this horrible wave" of meth labs. Coye said. "These houses are filthy and still will be. It doesn't go away."

Police maintain list of former meth lab sites

Tulsa residents who are concerned about whether a meth lab may have been on property they are renting or considering buying can contact the Tulsa Police Department's Special Investigations Division at 669-6068.

A partial list of former meth-lab sites reported to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency by law enforcement agencies across the nation can be found online at www.tulsaworld.com/methlabs. Click on Oklahoma or any other state to see the list for that state.

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