

Tulsa: Meth problems persist

By KIM ARCHER World Staff Writer
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Cleaning up former drug labs must be addressed, he says

Bill Coyle follows stringent, self-imposed standards for cleaning homes that housed illicit methamphetamine labs.

As a guide, he uses standards adopted by Washington state, the first state to establish guidelines for cleaning clandestine meth labs in 1996.

He does this because Oklahoma has no regulations of its own and does not require secondary cleanup of residences that once housed dangerous meth labs.

"We should look at other states and ask, 'Why are they doing that?' " Coyle said. "The answer is, those states are doing this to protect the health of their citizens."

Coyle owns and operates Apex BioClean, a Tulsa company that got its start a year ago cleaning up crime scenes. In July, Coyle added secondary meth-lab cleanup to his repertoire of services.

A registered nurse at St. Francis Hospital on weekends and a Life Flight paramedic, Coyle was able to educate himself quickly about meth-lab cleanup.

"What started as an add-on to my business has taken on a life of its own," he said.

Coyle has been certified in meth-lab cleanup by an institution in Idaho and continues to get more education and more credentials as he goes

along.

The region has few secondary meth clean-up operations, which has Coyle traveling to Colorado, Tennessee and other states to gut houses, clear them of carpet, upholstery and other items, and painstakingly clean them inch by inch.



Bill Coyle, who owns and operates Apex BioClean, started his company last year to clean up crime scenes. He has since added secondary meth-lab cleanup to his list of services.

TOM GILBERT / Tulsa World file

As time passes, he said, he becomes more concerned about contaminated residences as a public health concern.

"A friend of mine said, 'Why are you getting these certifications? There's no law.' I just said, 'Do you know how many certifications I have for Life Flight alone? Why? Because the public demands it, the public deserves it, and I treat this business with the utmost respect.'"

Only a handful of states have standards governing the decontamination of former meth labs, Coye said. In some states, only a couple of counties have enacted cleanup regulations.

Meth is manufactured in clandestine labs. Meth cooks use highly toxic, flammable liquids -- such as drain cleaner, acetone, lighter fluid or Coleman fuel -- to change pseudoephedrine in cold pills into methamphetamine.

The risk of explosion or fire is great, and exposure to those chemicals by first responders such as firefighters, police officers and emergency medical personnel has been cited for widespread medical problems.

After law enforcement authorities uncover a meth lab, certified professionals cart off and dispose of the toxic chemicals that were used to "cook" the drug.

But the contamination doesn't just go away. It stays on the walls, the furniture, the carpet and in the duct work, and sometimes it is absorbed into the drywall, Coye said. Every pound of methamphetamine produced leaves six pounds of toxic chemical waste, he said.

Part of the reason states have not jumped to enact secondary clean-up standards is that no scientific proof exists that such exposure is harmful, although anecdotal evidence abounds, Coye said.

Many of the chemicals used in methamphetamine production are known carcinogens, he said.

In 2004, Oklahoma enacted a groundbreaking law to restrict the sale of over-the-counter cold medicines that contain pseudoephedrine or ephedrine, a primary ingredient in the production of methamphetamine.

Other states followed Oklahoma's lead, but some have surpassed the Sooner State by enacting secondary clean-up laws and regulations.

"We need to follow that up with cleaning these residences where meth labs have been busted," Coye said. "How many are there in Tulsa alone that we don't know about?"

Contamination from a meth lab can remain even five years after it is shut down. It is up to homeowners or property companies to take the initiative to have the site cleaned up.

The bottom line is that public health is at stake, Coye said.

"This really is the Wild West out here," he said. "We need to be on the leading edge of this."

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