

The Mississippi Press

Meth arrests and lab seizures declining in Jackson County

Tuesday, September 07, 2010

By CHERIE WARD, The Mississippi Press

PASCAGOULA, Mississippi -- A law that took effect in July treating pseudoephedrine as a Schedule III controlled substance - which makes the drug illegal to possess without a prescription - seems to be making a difference in Mississippi and Jackson County.

Pseudoephedrine -- commonly found in nasal and sinus decongestants -- is the key element in the meth-making process. As of July 1, state law requires that pseudoephedrine be available through a doctor's prescription only.

Before July, Mississippi consumers needed only a photo ID to purchase what are now prescription-only medications, including Sudafed, Advil Cold and Sinus, Bronkaid, Primatene, Claritin-D, Aleve-D, Nyquil-D, Mucinex D, Tylenol Sinus and Severe Cold, and Zyrtec-D.

Mississippi is the second state in the nation, after Oregon, to require a prescription for such medicines.

"Last year was the first time the number of meth arrests exceeded arrests for powder and crack cocaine," said Marshall Fisher, director of the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics.

Fisher reported last month that meth-related arrests are one-third of drug-related arrests in Mississippi. As narcotics agents statewide watched the number of meth labs more than double, from 300 in 2008 to 722 in 2009, they knew something had to change. Marshall said that was the driving force behind the anti-meth legislation, which he and local drug agents pushed.

"It used up a lot agent hours to track down leads we got from the old system," Fisher said. "We were neglecting other areas tracking down possible leads. There were loopholes within the old system, which meth-makers exploited."

Fisher said statewide agents discovered drugstore employees were making extra money buying pseudoephedrine for friends, customers - anyone else willing to pay a fee.

"And the old system only tracked purchases by drugstores," Fisher said. "The meth problem had outgrown the old tracking system. We arrested a guy with 60 IDs. How do you track a guy with 60 IDs?"

Lt. Curtis Spiers, commander of the Narcotics Task Force of Jackson County, said there were only 12 meth arrests last month, down from 28 in July. In June, Spiers reported there were 48 meth arrests that month and 52 in May.

Meth lab seizures are decreasing as well, Spiers said.

"There were 21 labs seized in July, 22 in June, and 31 in May," Spiers said. "There were only six in August. We're seeing the trend go down."

Spiers maintained that if the rest of the country would follow Mississippi and Oregon the number of meth labs seized would dramatically decline, almost overnight, and improve public safety.

"Of course, if that happened, the cartel would start smuggling methamphetamine into the United States -- just like they are already doing - only on a much larger scale," Spiers said. "The law taking hold nationwide would decrease the meth labs. As far as a public safety issue, meth labs are the largest issue we deal with. Meth addiction is a problem and getting help is a choice, however, if they are cooking meth in a neighborhood - that's a huge public safety risk."

Meth is highly addictive, and the manufacturing process is one of the drug's dangerous aspects.

A combination of chemicals and high temperatures produces toxic fumes and a volatile, highly combustible situation, Fisher said.

"Cleaning up a meth site can cost \$2,500 to \$7,500 and it's the only drug with ancillary costs," Fisher said.

Another expense, Fisher added, is drug agent certification.

"Drug agents handle all garbage associated with the manufacture of meth as hazardous waste," Fisher said. "They earn certification through intense training, where they practice contained breathing and how to properly remove protective clothing."

Enterprise - Journal

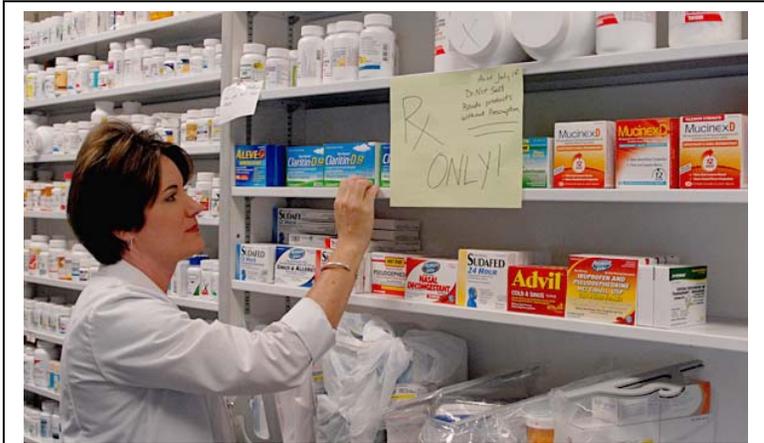
Drug agents hope new law is prescription for meth eradication

Sunday, August 15, 2010

By Angelia Parker, Enterprise-Journal

A law that took effect in July treats pseudoephedrine like a Schedule III controlled substance — an illegal drug. Without a prescription, possession is illegal and could result in a range of criminal charges.

Before July, consumers needed only a photo ID to purchase what are now prescription-only medications containing pseudoephedrine. For some, the law is an inconvenience and means an additional expense of a trip to the doctor's office to obtain a prescription.



Aaron Rhoads, Enterprise-Journal
Super D pharmacist Anna Platt gets a box of cold medicine for a customer. A law that took effect July 1 requiring a prescription for medication containing pseudoephedrine is helping combat meth, drug agents say.

"It makes it hard for people with legitimate issues," said Keith Guy, a pharmacist and owner of Guy's Pharmacy in McComb.

But for law enforcement, the law is a wrench in the spread of crystal methamphetamine labs already peppered across the state, as it limits one of the main ingredients in the meth-making process.

With just six weeks on the books, the new law seems to be working. Figures from the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics show a 50 percent drop in cases involving meth labs statewide in July 2010, with 22 arrests, compared to July 2009, which had 46.

Mississippi is the second state in the nation, after Oregon, to require a prescription for pseudoephedrine for medicines such as Sudafed, Advil Cold and Sinus, Bronkaid, Primatene, Claritin-D, Aleve-D, Nyquil-D, Mucinex D, Tylenol Sinus and Severe Cold, and Zyrtec-D.

Narcotics agents hope it will stop the spread of the drug that accounts for one-third of drug-related arrests in Mississippi.

"Last year was the first time the number of meth arrests exceeded arrests for powder and crack cocaine," said Lt. Eddie Hawkins, methamphetamine field coordinator for the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics.

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As narcotics agents watched the number of meth labs in the state more than double, from 300 in 2008 to 722 in 2009, they knew something had to change.

“It used up a lot agent hours to track down leads we got from the old system,” said MBN Director Marshall Fisher. “We were neglecting other areas tracking down possible leads.”

There were loopholes within the old system, which meth-makers exploited, Fisher said.

“We found out drugstore employees were making extra money buying pseudoephedrine for friends, customers — whoever,” Fisher said.

“And the old system only tracked purchases by drugstores,” Fisher said.

The meth problem had outgrown the old tracking system, which required only a photo ID to purchase products containing pseudoephedrine.

“We arrested a guy with 60 IDs,” Fisher said.

He said people racked up large quantities of pseudoephedrine by “smurfing,” which is drug agent slang for a group of people buying pseudoephedrine with different IDs at different drugstores.

Unless pseudoephedrine sales faced more scrutiny, the meth problem would only worsen, Fisher said.

“Just this year, we’ve made 548 arrests for meth-lab incidents. And that’s just the bureau,” he said.

Southwest Mississippi Narcotics Enforcement Unit Commander Tim Vanderslice is confident in the law, although he acknowledges people will continue buy pseudoephedrine in places where it is available without a prescription, such as Louisiana.

“As long as somebody wants to do something, we can’t stop them,” he said. “We may not be able to stop it, but we can at least knock out some of it.”

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Fisher said the reasons for making meth a prime target for eradication are numerous.

“Meth is a public health and safety issue,” he said.

“The number of incidents of sexually abused children in homes where parents use or manufacture meth is off the charts.”

This year agents in Mississippi have removed 140 children from homes where the parents or guardians are suspected of using or manufacturing meth.

“When they’re using, their kids are not a priority anymore,” Fisher said, adding that most children who are removed from homes where meth is an issue are scarred for life.

"I've never heard of any parent — rehabilitated or not — who ever made any attempt to petition the court to regain custody of their children," he added.

Finding a responsible relative to leave the children with is another common problem, Fisher said.

"We have no way of knowing if a relative will provide a safe environment for these children," he said.

Then there are the environmental concerns.

Meth is highly addictive and potentially fatal, and the manufacturing process is one of its a dangerous aspect of the drug. A combination of chemicals and high temperatures produces toxic fumes and a volatile and highly combustible situation.

"Cleaning up a meth site can cost \$2,500 to \$7,500. It's the only drug with ancillary costs," Fisher said.

Another expense is agent certification. Agents handle all garbage associate with the manufacture of meth as hazardous waste. They earn certification through intense training, where they practice contained breathing and how to properly remove protective clothing.

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Meth manufacturers and people with colds are not the only ones the law affects. Pharmacists also have concerns.

"Most drug companies started reformulating products when they realized people were using (pseudoephedrine) illegally," said Anna Platt, a pharmacist at Super D Drugstore in McComb.

She said drug companies replaced psuedoephedrine with phenylephrine, a decongestant designed to work like pseudoephedrine.

Though Guy prefers homeopathic remedies, he thinks pseudoephedrine provides more effective symptom relief.

"From a financial standpoint, it could hurt pharmacies," he said.

He said pharmacies will lose money if they do not sell medicine that is prescription-only under the new law.

Dr. Andy Watson of StatCare in McComb said the law has not had any affect on his practice or costs of office visits.

"There are hundreds of decongestant combinations of decongestants they prescribe for colds and sinus infections," he said.

Though not a significant amount, Watson has written prescriptions for Claritin-D and Sudafed since the law took effect.

John Roberts, pharmacist and owner of Corner Drugstore in Magnolia, is optimistic about the law.

“My customers won’t have any problems getting prescriptions,” he said.

Familiar with the majority of his customers, Roberts said people have asked about the law but no one has complained.

He said all prescription medications do not necessarily cost more than over-the-counter medications.

In fact, he thinks the law could be beneficial to some because some insurance companies only pay for prescription medications.

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Along with other law enforcement officials, Fisher studied the success Oregon experienced after enacting similar legislation in 2005. Agents in Oregon saw a 96 percent decrease in the number of meth labs in 2006.

Fisher is confident Mississippi will experience similar success.

“It’ll take one-and-a-half to two years before we see maximum results,” Fisher estimates.

Fisher said drug companies were the biggest source of resistance to the legislation.

“Members of the Mississippi Medical Association, Mississippi Board of Independent Pharmacists, Board of Pharmacists and Mississippi Board of Medical Licensure all lobbied with us to get this legislation passed,” Fisher said.

He described this as a genuine bipartisan issue, with support on both sides of the aisle.

“Politicians who usually cannot agree on anything agreed on this,” he said.

Aware of critics of the legislation, Fisher understands the law is an inconvenience for some people.

“If the law doesn’t work then the critics can blame me,” he said.

“Even if we only save a few children, then it’s worth it to me.”

The Mississippi Press

Meth arrests down in July in Jackson County

Monday, August 9, 2010
Cherie Ward, The Mississippi Press

An anti-methamphetamine law tightening distribution rules for pseudoephedrine took effect in July and some drug agents are saying it's already making a difference in meth-related arrests.

"But, it will take a good 90 days or six months to get a true snapshot of the effects throughout the state," said Marshall Fisher, director of the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics.

Pseudoephedrine -- commonly found in the nasal and sinus decongestant Sudafed -- is the key element in the meth-making process. As of July 1, state law requires that pseudoephedrine be available through a doctor's prescription only. Mississippi and Oregon are the only states with such a law.

"With only two states with this type of law, we'll still have smurfers going across state lines and people that hoarded it," Fisher said. "We're seeing results, but it could be a year before we see a significant reduction."

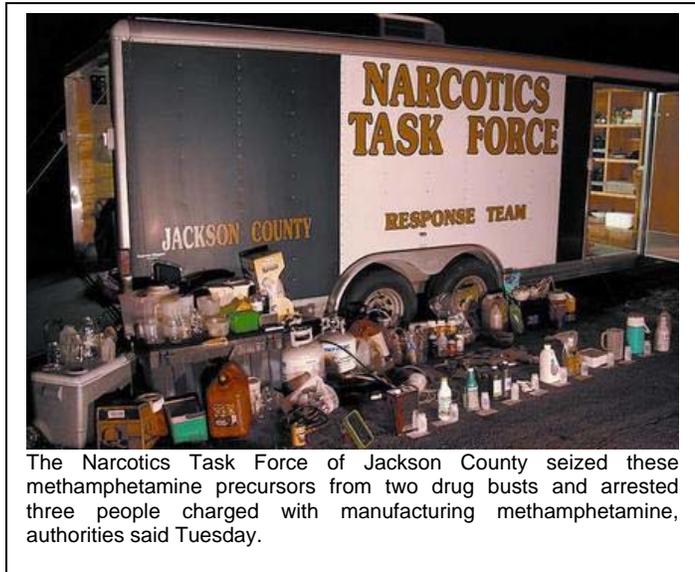
Lt. Curtis Spiers, commander of the Narcotics Task Force of Jackson County, reported in December that the number of methamphetamine arrests in 2009 topped cocaine arrests in Jackson County for the first time in the task force's 20-year history, with 222 meth arrests and 93 meth lab seizures.

"From January through July of this year, we've had 238 meth arrests," Spiers said.

The arrests outweigh other apprehensions, including 83 for cocaine and 86 for marijuana so far this year. There also have been 142 meth lab seizures since January.

Fisher said the statewide numbers are similar, with 722 labs seized in 2009 and 989 meth arrests. He said there have been 569 meth labs seized and 685 meth-related arrested since January.

"We knew we were poised to double our arrests from last year," Spiers said. "That's why we pushed for this law. We just need the rest of the country to follow."



The Narcotics Task Force of Jackson County seized these methamphetamine precursors from two drug busts and arrested three people charged with manufacturing methamphetamine, authorities said Tuesday.

Spiers said the law is making a difference, and he hopes in the long run to see a significant decrease in meth arrests as well as usage.

In July, there were 28 meth arrests, down from 48 in June and 52 in May. There were 21 labs seized in July, 22 in June, and 31 in May.

"In just one month's time, it's already trending a downward spiral," Spiers said.

In 2005, the Oregon Legislature was the first group of lawmakers to pass a statewide anti-meth law, which drew national attention. Oregon's law requiring a prescription for medicine with pseudoephedrine took effect in July 2006.

Oregon Attorney General John Kroger said Friday that in 2004, before his state's anti-meth law was passed, police busted 472 meth labs statewide.

"In 2007, authorities shut down only 22," Kroger said. "The number of seizures fell to 10 in 2009."

Kroger added that his state's property crime rate, which he said has a direct correlation to meth use, declined by 17 percent in 2006, the largest decrease in the nation that year.

Fisher said in Mississippi there were 61 meth arrests in July 2009, and there were 45 last month.

"Within the next couple of years, we're absolutely expecting numbers like Oregon," Fisher said. "I absolutely believe this law will have a significant reduction."