

LOVELAND

Facing The Problem of

METH USE

The headlines spell out the clear path to destruction that meth use causes.

While not the most widely used drug in Loveland – marijuana holds that distinction – methamphetamine is the most problematic drug, says Loveland Police Sgt. Brent Newbanks. Area newspapers increasingly report the concerns of law-enforcement, government and health-care officials over the fall-out and repercussions meth use has in a community.

The virulent addiction, violent, criminal behavior and toxic mess that go hand-in-hand with methamphetamine use rock communities around the nation. Loveland has not been immune to the problems that accompany this drug.

If media headlines outline the situation, before and after photos of meth users provide graphic illustration of what this drug costs users, their families and those around them.



Joseph

1.5 years later



Jennifer

1.5 years later



Theresa

2.5 years later

Addiction a main METH trait

From taster to junkie in an afternoon. That is a defining characteristic of methamphetamine use.

Swallowed, smoked, snorted, injected. Pills, powder, chunks, colored or clear. Its use and substance comes in many varieties. Regardless of the drug's appearance, however, its effect is usually the same.

For the sake of one "high," one tryout, one mistake in judgement, lives can change drastically. One dose can create an addiction that will cause a lifetime wasted seeking chemical highs and experiencing quality of life lows.

Keeping the supply coming to feed this insatiable addiction becomes the meth user's top priority. The addiction steps first in line ahead of spouse, children, job, school, safety and personal health. Crime – sometimes violent – is the frequent route for obtaining the resources to buy more of the drug.

The addiction is hard to hide. A meth user often: is nervous, fidgets, paranoid, losing weight, has rotting teeth, unemployed, a school drop out and violent.

A misery that loves company

The effects of meth are rarely limited to just the user. The need for the drug becomes a user's primary focus. As a result, everything and everyone around the meth user is drawn into the ugliness.

Because many meth users already have an ongoing drug problem, their situation isn't new to those around them. It is, however, another major step on a downward spiral.

Frequently unemployed and unemployable, the meth user employs crime to feed his or her addiction.

Fraud and forgery, with the help of personal computers, are now commonly used to fund addictions. Fraudulent checks and identification are often created using other people's bank account data. Thefts of blank checks or other banking information from car break-ins or unlocked vehicles is common. Stealing vehicles from citizens or from the drug customers of dealers who are owed money is also commonplace. Fortunately in Loveland, burglaries are relatively infrequent.

Meth users become increasingly violent. This trait can have devastating results for a citizen in the wrong place or a police officer doing his job. Violence between meth users isn't uncommon, either. Methamphetamine users frequently carry weapons.

Suffer the children

The effects of meth on children – not as users, but as innocent bystanders -- are often overlooked. Caught in the circle of meth use and its devastation, the health and well being of children can be totally disregarded in the face of their parents' unrelenting need for the drug. Exposure to the chemicals and fire dangers of meth production and use at home can be as harmful to non-users as it is to users.

Cleaning up the METH mess

Meth use has clear physical, mental and financial consequences for the user, his or her family, friends and others. But the problem reaches much further.

"It's a community health and safety issue," says Loveland Fire Chief Mike Chard. "People on meth often don't get better. The problem perpetuates itself and poses a threat to the health and safety of the neighbors, the community and the environment."

A paramedic for 23 years and certified in hazardous materials removal for 15, Chard is all too familiar with the fall-out of meth production and addiction.

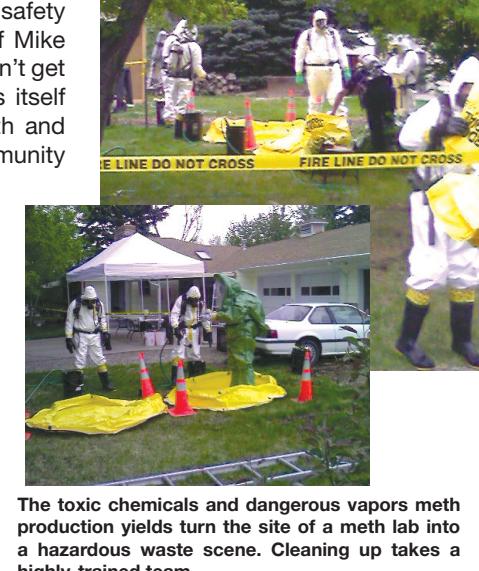
The problem, he explains, is that meth can be produced almost anywhere: in houses, garages, car trunks, rental trucks, storage facilities and backyard sheds. The process produces toxic wastes that can turn up in apartment dumpsters, open spaces or even backyards.

Unsuspecting children, neighbors and people in the community are put at risk.

Disposing of these chemicals safely is where the fire department comes in. Loveland Fire and Rescue responds to handle any chemical spills and make the situation safe for law enforcement.

Because of the poisonous vapors and potential fire danger, great care must be taken to ensure the safety of those in the immediate environment, such as neighbors, as well as those who do the actual clean-up work. A highly trained team must follow carefully orchestrated procedures to secure and dispose of the hazardous wastes.

The fire department assists in overseeing the clean-up of the site, which is done by a private hazardous materials clean-up company.



The toxic chemicals and dangerous vapors meth production yields turn the site of a meth lab into a hazardous waste scene. Cleaning up takes a highly-trained team.

Professional clean up by an industrial hygiene company and be approved by both the health department and the City building department before a new certificate of occupancy can be issued.

Chard estimates that the fire department gets called to deal with six to eight meth sites per year. While the problem is not as severe as in some cities he's lived in, any meth presence poses a danger to the community.

"Meth is a migratory disease," Chard says. "Meth producers will go where it's easier to set up shop." Chard recommends the need for effort by both law enforcement and vigilant citizens. Clues to watch for include an unusual amount of activity at a house, strange smells emanating from the place and large quantities of bulk chemicals such as stove lighter fluid and lye.

Prevention, enforcement both necessary

A great deal of effort, manpower and money is aimed at the meth problem in Loveland and Larimer County, both for prevention and enforcement.

The Larimer County Drug Task Force, made up of members of enforcement agencies from throughout the county, is involved in both. The 17 member force deals with drug concerns of all varieties, and considers meth a top priority.

Prevention

Prevention takes a variety of formats, including:

- Educational presentations. More than 125 presentations last year to school gatherings, community groups, business groups and others. Presentation requests are welcome.
- Drug Endangered Children. Direct and indirect prevention efforts for children left behind, exposed to chemicals, in unsafe environments. Interaction with child protection agencies.
- Hotel/motel program. Training and education to lodging management on how to recognize/prevent use of rooms for drug use/manufacture. I-25 is regarded as a significant drug transportation route.
- Retail inventory control. Already very successful in Loveland, this encourages retailers to keep over-the-counter drugs used in meth preparation behind the counter where they're not easily accessed by thieves.
- Legislative involvement. Close attention to statehouse drug prevention efforts, such as lab cleanup and inventory control legislation.
- School Resource Officers. Continuing efforts by local in-school police officers toward prevention education, including one-on-one work with at-risk kids.

Enforcement

Needless to say, arrests and apprehensions by police occur often as part of their day-to-day patrol and response duties. Other efforts aimed specifically at drug enforcement include:

- Drug Tip Program. Response to tips discussed or messages left 24/7 at 416-2560
- Criminal Interdiction group. Frequent formal gatherings of enforcement personnel from a variety of area agencies to share information, suggestions, technology updates, training sessions.
- Information sharing. Communication within and between law enforcement personnel of information and behavior likely associated with drugs. Patrol officers especially important here.
- Coalitions. Working with neighboring cities and counties to share info and resources.
- Undercover operations. Much surveillance used in targeting and arresting higher-impact users and dealers.
- Quiet apprehension. Individual users taken into custody leading to surveillance, intelligence and arrest of other offenders.
- Advanced technology. Ever-increasing use of latest technology, including digital audio and video equipment and the Internet.