

MethCheck®: Putting a Dent in Meth Lab Suppliers

**By Sheriff Keith Cain
Daviness County, Kentucky**

Nearly 5,000 pseudoephedrine tablets, 69 cans of starting fluid, nine bottles of drain cleaner and more than \$2,000 in cash.

Detectives with the Lake Cumberland Area Drug Task Force in south central Kentucky made this discovery after tracking a suspected supplier to a nearby meth lab; an all too common occurrence for law enforcement agencies across the country as the war on illegal meth continues to grow.

A case like this would typically take six to 12 months to close, but this case wrapped in three weeks when the drug trafficking suspects were identified and arrested. Authorities attribute the swift conclusion to a computerized system called MethCheck, which is changing the way law enforcement and pharmacies track sales of pseudoephedrine (PSE), a key ingredient in cold medicines and methamphetamine.

Anyone who wears a badge is aware of how serious the meth problem has become in our communities. The Combat Methamphetamine Epidemic Act of 2005, which regulates retail over-the-counter PSE sales, has created an inconvenience for meth lab suppliers and the “cooks.” Placing products containing PSE behind the counter mandates the buyer to provide identification and sign purchase logs.

Until recently, most pharmacies maintained paper logs to track PSE buyers. Suspected “smurfers” avoided exceeding the legal limit at a single store by visiting multiple stores, assuming information was not being shared. They were right. The logs became very thick, very fast, making it difficult to manage and track every customer who came in the door.

“With the written logs, we would visit pharmacies, pick up the logs, and compare them to see who is buying,” said Operation UNITE Det. Brian Lewis. UNITE is a regional anti-drug initiative encompassing 29 southern and eastern Kentucky counties. “It would take us two or three days to copy the logs and complete our review.”

Lewis and team were the first to begin using MethCheck as a pilot program in 2005 and immediately began noticing a difference in their investigations. Nearby pharmacies were equipped with the MethCheck system, which electronically scans drivers’ licenses and maintains the information in a secure database. Investigators accessed the information on their computers; saving time spent traveling to each pharmacy and reviewing the records. Lewis said they can now scan the pharmacy logs in minutes instead of days.

Operation UNITE’s success prompted officials to take MethCheck to the entire state. In its first six months of statewide usage, Kentucky authorities were able to block the illegal sale of more than 35,000 grams of PSE, which potentially prevented the manufacture of approximately 17,000 grams of meth. Approximately 16,000 pharmacies in 48 states currently contribute PSE purchase

data to MethCheck. In 2008, MethCheck managed more than 11 million real-time PSE sales, totaling 16 percent of all U.S. sales.

Pilot programs in Missouri, Florida, Alabama, California, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Arkansas are showing promising results as well. The Florida Department of Law Enforcement has been using MethCheck since early 2008. Within the first year, authorities attributed 90 arrests to the service.

“MethCheck has proven to be very useful in law enforcement to violators,” said Kurt Posey, FDLE government analyst. “The Santa Rosa County Sheriff’s Office Narcotics Unit reported 19 meth-related arrests as a direct result of MethCheck.”

Posey said the FDLE has also used the database to share information among states in the region, including a contribution to a federal investigation in Tennessee. The FDLE discovered a Tennessee resident making more than 130 above-the-limit purchases within one year in Florida.

In Missouri, the St. Louis County Methamphetamine Precursor Diversion Task Force continues to initiate investigations based on suspicious buying activities. Since MethCheck was introduced there, a total of nine conspiracy cases have been indicted through the United States Attorney’s Office for the Eastern District of Missouri. Eighty-three people were indicted for Conspiracy to Possess Pseudoephedrine. Nearly half were sentenced from 14 to 151 months in the federal prison system. In August 2008, the task force and the FBI conducted a series of suspect round ups resulting in 68 indictments.

“Prior to MethCheck, we primarily relied on the three major retail pharmacy chains to send us information on PSE purchases. This consisted of developing a suspect through information passed on from citizens, officers and detective investigations,” said Sgt. Tom Murley of the St. Louis Police Department. “When we had a name, we sent it to the corporate offices and would receive the information several days or weeks later, delaying an investigation as we waited.”

Murley said detectives would travel to each pharmacy to review the paper logs. Some logs were easy to read while others were illegible.

“When the local grocery store pharmacies were linked to MethCheck, we were able to locate our suspect’s purchases immediately and identify numerous other suspicious purchasers. This helped accelerate our investigations,” he said.

In 2007, there were 37 meth-related arrests in Mobile County, Alabama. Once MethCheck was implemented, the number of arrests almost doubled in six months with 33 meth labs shut down, according to the sheriff’s office.

In Daviess County, Ky., we have seen our share of meth labs. As with other communities, the smurfers try their best to make their PSE purchases without detection. MethCheck has had a significant role in helping us keep them from succeeding. Between January and April 2009, there have been at least five incidents where MethCheck has played a role in tracking suspected smurfers, leading to nearly a dozen arrests. The information we have retrieved from this valuable tool has established probable cause to obtain search warrants and ultimately make arrests.

MethCheck's success at identifying smurfers has forced them to cross state lines to purchase PSE. Recognizing the trend along its own borders, Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear recently announced a partnership with a handful of southern Indiana counties across the Ohio River from Louisville. The partnership prompted Floyd and Clark counties in Indiana to adopt local ordinances allowing them to participate with Kentucky's MethCheck program. Stephen Luce, executive director of the Indiana Sheriffs' Association, called the collaboration a great step for law enforcement in both states. Gov. Beshear said he hopes other bordering states will join in.

MethCheck is provided by Appriss Inc., a Louisville, Ky.-based company responsible for the nation's only automated victim information and notification system called Victim Information and Notification Everyday (VINE). Since 2005, the company has seen tremendous interest and growth in MethCheck. The service averages 45,000 transactions per day including purchases, returns, voids and signatures.

"Both pharmacists and detectives agree that MethCheck has made their jobs easier and improved their working relationship," said Mike Davis, Appriss president. "We're hoping it will also mean fewer meth labs in years to come."

We in law enforcement echo those sentiments. Early on we learned because of its widespread abuse that partnering with the private and public sectors alike was essential in ridding our communities of this insidious drug. Due largely to the efforts of Appriss, we have made significant progress on obtaining that lofty goal.

Sheriff Cain is past president of the Kentucky Sheriff's Association and chairman of the NSA Drug Enforcement Committee.