

SUBJECT: Clandestine Drug Laboratories	SECTION: 303.10
REVISED: DECEMBER 3, 2003	PAGE(S): 3

PURPOSE

The number of clandestine drug laboratories has increased dramatically in recent years. The number of seizures, "busts," or "raids," made by law enforcement agencies has also increased. Clandestine drug laboratory investigations, seizures, and arrests of suspects are all police department or law enforcement agency matters. However, local law enforcement agencies are calling upon fire departments, EMS, and hazardous incident response teams for assistance during raids and for advice on safety matters.

POLICY

The Reading Fire Department will provide limited support for police departments and other agencies, when requested, at sites of clandestine drug laboratories. Support may consist of, but is not limited to: providing research and information on chemicals that are suspected or are known to be in the laboratory, EMS, hose lines for safety, remote exterior air monitoring, and decontamination of police entry personnel.

HAZARDS

Substitution of proper equipment with unsafe items is prevalent in low budget clandestine laboratory operations. For example, pressure cookers have been substituted for three neck flasks in the initial cooking stage of methamphetamine. Without ventilation, this type of operation can easily generate toxic levels of phosphine gas.

Booby traps have been left in place and armed even after a lab has been abandoned. Opening or moving doors, windows, refrigerator doors, chemical containers, or furniture may be a triggering mechanism for an explosive device or chemical reaction that is lethal. Trip wires made from monofilament fishing line may be strung across doorways, hallways, or across rooms to activate different types of devices. It is imperative that **nothing** is moved, shut off, turned on, or touched, at a laboratory, whether it is operational or abandoned. Electric switches, vacuum pumps, glassware, chemical containers, or anything that is plugged into a wall outlet should not be touched. Water sources, especially to reflux or condensing towers, should not be shut off. Shutting off the water supply to a cooking process can result in an explosion.

INDICATORS

Personnel should be aware of the indications of potential clandestine drug laboratories when responding to EMS, fire, check odor, or other service request. Proper disposal of the hazardous material(s) in a clandestine laboratory is the responsibility of the law enforcement agency that is making the seizure. The law enforcement agency on-scene must arrange clean-up with the proper contractor. Common indicators are:

- Unusual odors like ether, acetic, solvents, and odors of urea.
- Glassware that is normally associated with school or industrial laboratories, such as flasks, beakers, flasks with vacuum ports, glass cooling towers, and funnels.
- Heating elements, hot plates, or heating mantles.
- Vacuum pumps, plastic or rubber tubing.
- Marked and unmarked chemical containers of various sizes.

SUSPECTED DRUG LABORATORY OPERATION – NOTIFICATION PROCESS

Personnel that encounter a suspected laboratory should withdraw to a safe location as soon as it is possible, using discretion on actions and radio conversation. The on-duty supervisor and the Police Department should be notified of the situation. If a situation warrants additional immediate action (e.g. evacuation of surrounding areas, several victims, a chemical release or spill), the Dispatch Center should be requested to dispatch an all-call.

NOTIFICATION FOR USE OF FIRE DEPARTMENT UNITS

Any agency requesting the fire department for assistance during seizure of a clandestine drug laboratory shall contact the on-duty supervisor. The agency that is requesting the assistance shall provide information on location, time, staging area, and the type of assistance that is needed. A pre-incident meeting shall be scheduled between the agency and chief fire officer to address the concerns noted above. Security of information will be strictly adhered to.

TACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The recognition of the presence of a clandestine drug laboratory that is involved in a fire may not occur until after fire control has been achieved. The initial indications of the presence of a laboratory may be subtle or very apparent. Depending on the products involved, a fire in a lab can spread faster and burn with more intensity than what might normally be expected. The color of the flames may appear to be an unusually bright or dark orange, or the flames may be of several different colors. An unusual color of smoke or odor may also be present.

A laboratory that is involved in a fire situation should be viewed pessimistically by Command. A defensive mode may be appropriate for personnel safety. Standard

protective clothing and SCBA use may not afford complete protection. An acceptable alternative is to protect any exposures and allow the fire to burn, providing the products of combustion being generated are not complicating the problem further. Run-off may also create a problem and diking may be necessary.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Personnel showing any signs or symptoms of a chemical exposure during or after any incident involving a laboratory or a suspected laboratory should be treated and transported to University Hospital. Critical life threatening injuries may require transport to the closest hospital. All potentially exposed personnel and equipment must be decontaminated.

ENTRY

Reading Fire Department personnel **will not** participate in a law enforcement agency entry operation into a suspected and unsecured clandestine drug laboratory. Security shall mean that the Police Department has surveyed the area and all suspects are in custody, and confirmation that the building has been searched and no explosive devices were found. Reading Fire Department personnel, in appropriate level of protection, may make an entry into a secured drug laboratory if an emergency situation involving hazardous materials develops and if the safety of Reading Fire Department personnel is not jeopardized.

Prior to taking any action at a suspected clandestine drug laboratory, the Reading Fire Department will request the response of a representative of the Drug Enforcement Authority (DEA). If a representative from the DEA is unable to respond directly to the location of the incident, every effort will be made to contact a representative by telephone to inform them of the situation. This should be accomplished by Command.

ADDITIONAL FIRE DEPARTMENT RESOURCE

Additional resource requirements needed at the scene will be determined by Command. A multi-company response will cause the activation of the incident command system.

DISPOSAL

Proper disposal of the hazardous material(s) in a clandestine laboratory is the responsibility of the law enforcement agency that is making the seizure. The law enforcement agency on-scene must arrange clean-up with the proper contractor.