

Tracking could be answer to meth Program would use computerized database for realtime, coordinated effort to keep one of drug's main ingredients out of criminal hands

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Narcotics officers from throughout Kentucky want to take a pilot program in Laurel County, which tracks pseudoephedrine sales, statewide.

Used in the production of methamphetamine, pseudoephedrine can only be purchased in small quantities - state law limits people to purchasing 9 grams of the substance each month. Four boxes of Claratin D 12-hour pills, for instance - 40 doses of the product - would just exceed the limit for a person to purchase in one month.

The program is a cooperative effort between Operation Unite, a drug task force in East Kentucky, and Appriss Inc., a Louisville company that designed the computer software to track purchases, said Van Ingram, manager of the computer section of the Kentucky Office of Drug Control Policy.

The program has been active for more than a year, he said. "We're thrilled to death with it; they've discovered 15 meth labs," Ingram said. There have also been a number of people arrested and more under investigation. "We really hope they'll find the money to fund the program and do it statewide," Ingram said.

The program basically works by creating a computer database that lets a pharmacist know if the person attempting to purchase pseudoephedrine would be exceeding the monthly allotment, said Tommy Loving, director of the Bowling Green-Warren County Drug Task Force and president of the Kentucky Narcotics Officers Association.

"If established statewide, this program could nearly eliminate meth labs in

Kentucky,” Loving said. “We’ve already seen a 50 percent reduction in meth due to less available pseudoephedrine. With this bill, we could expect another reduction.” Current law requires consumers to sign a paper log kept at each pharmacy; it contains the date of purchase and the amount purchased. The lists are not published or distributed, though law enforcement officers can enter stores to review the lists, Loving said.

Methamphetamine will still come to Kentucky through normal smuggling channels, he said, but eliminating meth labs would also eliminate environmental hazards that are occurring in apartments, hotels and homes in the state. It would also keep task force detectives from having to be exposed to these hazardous materials while cleaning up laboratories. The projects have expanded beyond Laurel County to Oklahoma and Arkansas with pilot programs, said Mike Davis, president of Appriss, and are helping to catch criminals.

“In the time frame of technology, a statewide system could be done in about a year,” Davis said. “The question is political and financial support.” At this point, it’s unclear what a statewide effort would cost until bids for the computers could be received, Ingram said.

But Davis estimated that it would take less than \$1 million to equip every pharmacy in Kentucky with the computers. The pharmacies also like the system, because it eases the burden of paper registries, Davis said. Employees don’t have to take the time to review the paper registry, and it saves time for consumers as well. CVS has decided to place one in each of its 6,100 pharmacies in 42 different states, he said.

Several other states - including Missouri, Indiana, Illinois, Tennessee and Virginia - are considering pilot programs for the technology, Davis said. The paper sign-in sheets are also practically useless to law enforcement, Davis said, but a quick computer system would make it much simpler for law enforcement to track criminals and make arrests. Since the bill requiring purchase records went into effect, the task force has arrested five people for violating the purchasing requirements during combined efforts with Kentucky State Police Drug Enforcement Special Investigations West, he said. “An electronic system, though, would save hours if not days in terms of investigating those purchasing more pseudoephedrine than allowed,” Loving said. “It would make for much quicker resolution to cases.” The current system of logs is better than having nothing, which is what Kentucky had previously, he said. “But an electronic system would be like the difference

between light and dark,” Loving said. “We'd love to have a program like that in Warren County.”