



## **Authorities round up drug suspects**

By Dean Manning  
Staff Writer

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MethCheck received a check-plus grade Wednesday from local law enforcement officers.

Officers with UNITE — Unlawful Narcotics Investigations, Treatment and Education — working in conjunction with the Laurel County Sheriff's Office and Kentucky State Police, spread out across Laurel County Wednesday, arresting nine people who had been indicted for buying the pseudophedrine for the meth cooks or trafficking other illegal drugs.

The arrests in Laurel County were part of a regional roundup in Clay, Laurel and Leslie counties of 18 people accused of purchasing pseudophedrine to make methamphetamine. Dan Smoot, law enforcement director for UNITE, said the suspects all are accused of purchasing more than nine grams of pseudophedrine within 30 days from pharmacies in Laurel County.

Pseudophedrine is one of the essential ingredients in methamphetamine. MethCheck is a system of identification procedures that offers real-time, electronic reporting of pseudophedrine purchases.

Deputy Jason Back and Trooper Richie Baxter worked with UNITE Agents, picking up four people in the Corbin and Lily areas. As the UNITE agents and Back knocked on the front door of Rhonda Renee Stewart's home on Wilder Avenue in Corbin, Baxter watched the back door. There was no answer at the front door, but, within minutes, Baxter came around the house, escorting Stewart to Back's cruiser.

"She said she was just going out to smoke," Baxter said.

Within an hour, Back's cruiser was full, adding Taresa Gail Collins, 27, of Echo Valley Road and Linda Ann Hundley, 55, of Maple Grove School Road, each of whom had been indicted on one count of unlawful possession of methamphetamine precursors.

When the officer arrived at Collins' home, Back said they met several lines of resistance.

“The lady at the door told us she wasn’t there and that we should come back later to search,” Back said. “We told her we were going to search now.”

Behind a locked bedroom door, that Back had to kick open, officers found Collins and took her into custody.

The final stop for the group added James Everett Zeo, 31, of Maple Grove School Road, who had also been indicted for unlawful possession of methamphetamine precursors.

“Most of these individuals were visiting multiple pharmacies to obtain tablets or capsules containing pseudophedrine,” Smoot said. “Usually groups of two or three people travel together in order to maximized the amount of drugs they can obtain.”

Sheriff Fred Yaden said the indictments and arrests were the result of an extensive investigation to reduce the amount of methamphetamine in Laurel County by targeting those who supply the pseudophedrine.

“If you want to kill a tree, you attack the roots,” Yaden said. “This is what we are trying to do with the meth problem in Laurel County by going after the people who are buying the pseudophedrine.”

Under Senate Bill 63, which instituted the MethCheck Program in Kentucky in 2005, customers must provide a photo identification, signature and address. However, law enforcement was forced to manually pour over these records to determine if anyone was purchasing excessive amounts of pseudophedrine. As a result, in November 2005, the Kentucky Office of Drug Control Policy and Operation UNITE implemented MethCheck in Laurel County on a trial basis.

Instead of manual logs, MethCheck offers more efficient reporting of pseudophedrine purchases. In 2008, MethCheck went statewide.

“MethCheck was a contributing factor during this investigation,” Smoot said.

Laurel County Sheriff’s Lead Investigator Charles Loomis said each gram of pseudophedrine will produce about 1 gram of methamphetamine. A gram of meth sells for about \$100.

Ten other people who had been indicted on drug trafficking charges were also part of the roundup.

Yaden encourages anyone with information about drug dealers in Laurel County to contact the sheriff’s office, 864-6600.

“The bottom line is, we are trying to get a handle on the meth problem in Laurel County,” Yaden said.