



County is pioneering drug sales program: Purchases of key meth ingredient can be tracked

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Jan. 2--This year Daviess County will become one of the first in the state to implement an electronic system that will track pseudoephedrine purchases across Kentucky.

The commonwealth will become the second state in the country to track sales of the key ingredient in methamphetamine manufacturing once all pharmacies have adopted the new program by about June 30, officials said.

MethCheck is a real-time electronic reporting program scheduled to replace all of the paper logs kept in Kentucky's nearly 1,300 pharmacies. The paper logs have been used since 2005, when the General Assembly passed Senate Bill 63 that limits the amount of pseudoephedrine purchased by individuals to nine grams within 30 days.

The Louisville-based electronic program was tested for 18 months in Laurel County, where officials were able to bust 17 meth labs and arrest more than 40 people.

Under the current time-consuming manual system, law enforcement is responsible for retrieving all pharmacy logs and reviewing hundreds of transactions to determine if individuals are in violation.

For the past year, officials at the Daviess County Sheriff's Department have developed a similar tracking system, but the information is all entered by hand three days a week by a staff member.

And while the system has led to more than 20 local arrests, MethCheck -- already implemented in CVS Pharmacies countrywide -- is expected to take over Daviess County's method by March.

Van Ingram, compliance branch manager with the Kentucky Office of Drug Control Policy, said when Oklahoma entered a similar system they saw a 93 percent reduction in meth labs within a year.

"Kentucky made over 32,000 meth-related arrests in 2006," Ingram said. "We'd like to prevent some of those crimes from ever happening in the first place, and we think MethCheck will help with that."

MethCheck was created by Appriss, the same company that operates the VINE

program that notifies victims if a perpetrator is nearing a court date or release from jail.

Owner Mike Davis said the company began looking at law enforcement's need to track purchases electronically to enable them to identify patterns.

Davis said pharmacy employees will scan the cold medicine and then enter the buyer's driver's license information into the system. From there, the system tracks the license number to determine if the individual is buying too many pills in a 30-day limit.

"We saw an opportunity for technology to attack that problem and we went after it," Davis said.

At least four to five other states, including Florida, Mississippi, Iowa and Virginia, have expressed interest in using MethCheck, Davis said.

By next summer, all Kentucky pharmacies are expected to be equipped with the high-speed Internet system that will cost approximately \$360,000 to implement and \$500,000 a year to maintain.

Davis said that's about \$300 a month per county -- but officials are looking at the bigger savings. The new system will provide smoother transactions for customers who normally buy pseudoephedrine legally, who won't have to fill out a log, Ingram said.

Daviess County was chosen as a pioneer for the program because of Sheriff Keith Cain's nationwide and local efforts to fight the meth problem from his position on the board of the National Sheriff's Association, Davis said.

"We want him to be leading in this effort," he said.

Cain said one of the main benefits of the program is that it will keep offenders from traveling across county lines to purchase pseudoephedrine because they know counties don't monitor each other's transactions.

He pointed to the three major roundups that involved the arrests of individuals who had abused the pseudoephedrine law locally, and referenced all the man-power hours it took officials to manually obtain that information that will now be kept more efficiently statewide.

"I'm looking at how the system will give my staff more time, effort and manpower, which in turn gives more hands to work on the street," Cain said. "... I hope the community will see that the law (and this system) will affect the meth abuse and manufacturing we have in this community."