



## **The Impact of Meth Labs on the Real Estate Community**

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We have seen the results on TV as police in white suits and gas masks enter a house or apartment. It is from a homemade high better known as meth, a combination of lethal, potentially explosive ingredients brewed in secret laboratories often discovered only after badly mixed formulas turn into flames. A recent example of this was reported in the Rocky Mountain News "Kids escape drug blast." A great grandmother was watching two children while a meth lab was operating in her basement. The men making the meth got careless and the batch exploded. Unfortunately, this is becoming a regular occurrence in the Colorado news and its only the tip of the iceberg. For those looking for a cheap high crystal meth is an easy solution. A high can last 24 hours, costs about one-tenth the price of cocaine and can be made just about anywhere, by anyone with minimal skills.

For real estate community meth labs poses both health risks and disclosure challenges. Colorado law enforcement officials shut down 468 meth labs in 2002. This was double the number in 2001. Methamphetamine seizures in Denver in the first six months of 2003 increased by nearly 500 percent over the same period the previous year. For every one they shut down, 10 kept running, according to national law enforcement estimates. So the likelihood that any rental property, hotel room or resold home might have been a meth lab increases each year. When meth is being cooked acids and iodine gets everywhere leaving contaminating residue on countertops, walls and ceilings.

The health risk to those that come in contact with these areas is significant. The carcinogens and neurotoxins in the residue and gases that are produce in the cooking process can harm your lungs, sinuses, kidneys, and liver. A couple moved into a Thornton apartment in January. In a short period of time their 2-year daughter had reoccurring pneumonia and multiple ear infection while the husband and wife had throat infection and fatigue. After investigation, they discovered that the apartment in Thornton had been used as a meth lab. Tests showed that the drug was present in high levels in the apartment. They are now in the process of suing the property management company and building owners for failing to disclose the meth lab.

For realtors, just walking through a property that has been used as a meth lab poses risks. According to police sources for every pound of meth that is created 6 pounds of hazardous waste is created. Some of this is poured down drain or put out with the trash but frequently it is left on the property. The list of chemicals used in the production of meth is long and varies widely. Examples are phedrine or pseudophedrine (aka. Sudafed), brake cleaner (toluene), engine starter (ether), carburetor cleaner (methanol/alcohol), lye (sodium hydroxide), red phosphorus (matches) and fertilizer (anhydrous ammonia) to name a few. As can be seen from the list, all items are easily purchased from your local Safeway or Wal Mart. When these items are combined in the production of meth, they create a deadly brew that can explode, cause chemical burns or nerve damage on contact.

To protect ourselves, the real estate community must know of the signs of a meth lab. Typically, these tenants do not care about getting rid of the evidence, which will simplify recognition. In the trash there will be empty containers of cold-medicine bottles with the bottoms cut off, pill packages, bottles of starter fluid, carburetor cleaner, lye, and red stained coffee filters. Inside the property it will smell of chemicals or solvents normally not associated with residential housing. Rooms that house the meth lab will typically have running water and the walls will have red or



yellow staining. Look for discoloration of flooring, typically green or yellowish orange or acid type burns on the carpeting.

A typical meth lab looks like a collection of chemical bottles, glassware, hoses, coffee grinders, hot plates, kitty litter and pressurized cylinders. The cylinders can take many forms, including modified propane tanks, fire extinguishers, scuba tanks and soda dispensers. The tanks usually contain anhydrous ammonia or hydrochloric acid – both highly poisonous and corrosive. Meth lab equipment is frequently abandoned after use and the potentially explosive toxic chemicals are left behind. These materials are commonly dumped in trashcans, in boxes, or duffel bags. Many times left over chemicals will be dumped in a back yard or even under a house. If you see this type of evidence on a property, leave promptly and call the local police.

Currently there are no state standards for cleanup so the responsibility is left local municipalities. For example a meth lab was busted in Broomfield and the local building and police department cooperate to declare the building substandard. Once the owner is notified, he had to present the building department with a cleanup plan. Typically a contractor who specializes in this area does this cleanup.

Currently, there is no comprehensive method for tracking or listing homes that were used as meth labs. North Metro Drug Task Force publishes a list of lab investigation in Adams County on its website. Your local police can verify if the property is on that list. You should call your local law enforcement agency or health department to confirm that a seizure of chemicals took place on the property, and to obtain the name of any hazardous materials contractor who may have removed materials.

House lawmakers will take up a bill this year to give cities and counties the power to clean - or order the cleaning of - former meth labs. The plan also directs the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment to publish cleanup standards.

Additional information on Meth Labs and their cleanup is available at [WWW.MVPInspection.com](http://WWW.MVPInspection.com)

Rick Bunzel has 20 years experience as a firefighter in New Jersey, California and Colorado. He is currently a member of the Mountain View Fire Protection District and the Principle Inspector for Mountain View Property Inspection. If you have questions or comments, Rick Bunzel can be contacted at Mountain View Property Inspections @ 303-443-9063 or MVPinspection@comcast.net