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## South Georgia wages war on meth

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STATENVILLE — It has the ability to rip entire communities apart. It can spiral its respective clients deep into addiction, often never finding their way out.

In order to get their fix, people will go to great lengths, resorting to robbery and even ingesting their own bodily fluids.

Meth has rapidly become one of the most devastating and addictive drugs on the market, with its ease in manufacturing and availability, meth has spread across the country, finding a home in Georgia.

This year, the state launched the Georgia Meth Project, a prevention campaign aimed at reducing methamphetamine use.

Meth has become one of Georgia's most critical public health and law-enforcement challenges, according to the Georgia Meth Project. Combating meth use has cost the state an estimated \$1.3 billion in law-enforcement, treatment, social services and lost productivity.

The highly addictive drug has made its way to the southern end of the state showing up in places like Berrien, Clinch, Cook and Echols counties.

Echols County Sheriff Randy Courson began seeing cases related to meth about four years ago. The number of meth cases his department handles has steadily risen during those years.

Since January of this year, Courson estimates making at least 10 arrests related to meth and meth manufacturing.

Deputy Commander Fred Busbin, South Georgia Drug Task Force, believes the drug became a serious problem regionally nearly a decade ago.

Busbin and the South Georgia Drug Task Force work a six-county area. He has made meth-related arrests in most of these counties.

The reason the drug has exploded on the scene is simple, he said. "It's easy and addictive."

Chasing the

white dragon

Meth can be swallowed, snorted, smoked or injected. Depending on how the drug is taken, the high from meth can last from six to 24 hours.

Meth manufacturers can use a variety of ingredients, but the most common base chemical is ephedrine or pseudoephedrine, a substance found in many over-the-counter medicines.

Other ingredients include common household products: acetone (nail polish remover), iodine, anhydrous ammonia (fertilizer), hydrochloric acid (pool chemicals), lithium (batteries), red phosphorus (matches or road flares), sodium hydroxide (lye), sulfuric acid (drain cleaner) and toluene (brake fluid).

To convey the power of meth, Busbin compares it to powdered cocaine.

“With powdered cocaine, first off, you’ve got to know somebody that knows somebody that can get it over here to begin with. As far as the high value of it, you are talking about an hour from start to finish,” he said.

“As opposed to meth, you’re talking eight, nine or 10 hours (of high) off about the same dosage. With meth you don’t have to know anybody that can get it for you, you can make it yourself.”

The items used to manufacture meth can be bought at any discount store, he said.

“It’s nothing fancy at all — allergy pills, batteries, matchsticks, concrete cleaners,” Busbin said.

The items are used in a mixture and are “cooked” by the users, Sheriff Courson said.

Meth users can stay up for several days straight when they are using the drug, Busbin said.

“It’s not a catnap here or there. They are just up,” Busbin said.

The crash can come at the most unlikely of times, he said. Busbin cites the case of a recently arrested female meth user.

“When you arrest somebody, typically, going to sleep is not a normal reaction, but with the tweakers sometimes it is because they are coming down and the body is just involuntarily shutting down on them,” Busbin said. “Most people are kind of excited and upset, but if you catch them right it’s not uncommon for them (meth users) to go to sleep.”

Courson said a person who has used meth consistently is easy to pinpoint. Their faces are sunken. Rapid weight loss is apparent. If it’s bad enough, they suffer what is commonly known as “meth sores.”

Meth sores arise because users tend to neglect personal hygiene, Busbin said.

Since the drug is a stimulant it suppresses appetite, he said.

“Late nights, hard living, it makes them look like zombies,” Busbin said.

Teeth will rot due to exposure to the chemicals during cooking, especially if all the chemicals are not cooked completely before ingestion.

The addiction is deadly and will make normal people go to extreme lengths to sustain a high.

“They have figured out, and we have worked several down here, that the human body doesn’t process all the meth that it takes in and some of it is excreted through the urine,” Busbin said. “They will go back and pull some of the meth back out of the urine. They will store it in a jar and when they get enough urine they will go back and pull the meth back out of it.”

The urine is taken through the cooking process called “gassing” before it is ingested, Busbin said.

Other users have told Busbin that they peel off the scabs from meth sores and eat them seeking a high.

“Whether it does or not, I don’t know,” Busbin said. “But we’ve had a couple tell us that.”

## CAGING THE BEAST

Echols County is an appealing location for meth cookers due to the availability of large tracts of wooded land, Courson said.

Several years back, Courson accompanied by deputies and Busbin snuck up on some individuals cooking meth in a hunting club.

“They were right in the middle of cooking. We got about 10 feet from them before they even knew it,” Courson said.

Courson takes a hard-line approach to meth because the drug can lead to other crimes.

“Whenever you got meth manufacturing or any type of drug, you are going to have an increase in other crime,” Courson said. “You get thefts, burglaries. That’s why we try to combat the meth problem head-on to circumvent some of this other stuff.”

Catching a meth cooker or user is a difficult process as traffic stops don’t always yield results, Busbin said.

“These folks are clannish. They all stick together, whether they be in Echols County, Clinch County, wherever,” Courson said. “If one needs something, the other will help them get what they need.”

Most cookers in this area make meth to use, selling a portion to support their habit, Busbin said.

The drug is not being imported. Meth is manufactured and used in the same location, making it difficult to find.

“It’s regular household items, so if you do a traffic stop you may or may not have enough (evidence),” Busbin said. “It’s like with moonshine. You catch somebody with a truckload of sugar, there is not a whole lot you can do with that.”

Those cooking meth have even developed ways to bring down the cooking time. “They’ve cut it down from an hour to two hours to like 20 minutes,” Busbin said.

These methods and the ever-changing components of meth are partly spurred by the state and federal government’s restrictions on access to some of the ingredients.

“They could cure cancer if they put their minds to it,” Busbin said.

Cooking meth is a misnomer, Busbin adds. The items are mixed together, which starts a chemical reaction.

“You don’t have to have heat or electricity or anything else,” Busbin said. “Once you add the stuff together, it starts what they call a self-sustaining chemical reaction.”

That is why meth labs can be found in wooded areas or even in the trunks of cars, he said. “You don’t have to have any external power or heat.”

As with the term “cooking,” the name meth lab can be misleading as well.

“When we are talking about a lab, it can be something as fancy as a Mason jar and a Coke bottle,” Busbin said.

That does not make a meth lab any less dangerous to a person or the environment. The danger comes from experimenting with ingredients that are not designed to be mixed, Busbin said.

“They are not Harvard chemists by any means. It’s stuff that doesn’t play well together,” he said. “If you take lye and dump it in a toilet bowl it will blow up on you. It reacts that violently.”

Still, Busbin has seized handbooks outlining how to manufacture meth.

Once a meth lab is discovered, it becomes a community problem.

If a piece of property, such as a hunting club, is found to be contaminated by a meth lab, the land owner, by law, must attach to the deed, notice of the contamination, Courson said.

When a meth lab is found, Busbin’s most difficult and painstaking work begins after the arrests are made and the investigation is completed.

He has to put on what he calls the “marshmallow” suit to clean up the site. White in color, the suit completely covers a person’s body locking out air and any chemicals. Coupled with the need to carry an oxygen tank, the suit is sweltering and uncomfortable, Busbin said.

Adding to this discomfort, cleaners must wear this suit anywhere from eight hours to several days until the site is clean.

Courson feels that the sheriff’s department’s aggressive stance on meth has gotten the point across that the drug will not be tolerated in Echols County.

That does not mean the drug has been eradicated.

“It’s like putting out fires. You put out one and you’ve got to start working on another one,” Courson said. “But I think we’ve got them looking over their shoulder.”

The sheriff’s department has conducted education courses at school, but his outreach program is simple.

Both possession of meth and manufacturing of meth are felonies.

“The outreach is catching them,” he said. “The ones that we catch out here, we try to make examples out of them.”

But Courson is well aware that recovery is an option. He has helped some meth users get into treatment facilities to help with rehabilitation and recovery.

Busbin said the success rate for recovering addicts is about 7 percent.

## SLAYING THE DRAGON

Dallas Bennett works with addicts in the hope he can resurrect memories of the lives they lived prior to meth.

Bennett is a certified addiction counselor at Greenleaf Center.

At Greenleaf, counselors use a federally approved meth recovery regimen called the Matrix Program on their outpatient and inpatients.

The first step is detoxing patients. Then it is imperative that addicts get into an intensive support system and learn how to be accountable to the people helping them, Bennett said.

As a stimulant, meth releases a massive amount of dopamine in the brain, which is released when a person feels pleasure. Meth gives and releases an inordinate amount of dopamine, more than 10 times the amount released when a person has sex.

Bennett described the part of the brain that releases the dopamine as a well pump. When using meth, the pump is depleted by the unnatural amount being released. When the pump goes dry, people are governed by the animalistic part of their brain, he said.

“That’s where true addiction kicks in and makes a person do things they wouldn’t do in the right state of mind,” Bennett said.

This all-consuming addiction happens much faster with meth than with any other drug, he said. “Meth is actually eating brain mass. It’s destroying brain mass.”

With cocaine or heroin, brain cells are killed but, when a person stops the drug, brain cells grow back.

“With meth, it is actually killing brain mass and putting dark spots on the brain and it is not going to grow back,” Bennett said.

Due to the quick addiction and the way in which the drug affects the brain, the success rate for meth addict recovery is very low, he said.

Once detoxed, the dopamine pump in the brain will begin to recover, he said, and eventually fill back up. That process usually takes about six months to a year for the dopamine to return to normal levels.

“In that first six months to a year, it’s all biological. A lot of folks miss that. They think it’s spiritual or social. It’s really not. It’s biological,” Bennett said.

Meth puts a person’s brain into survival mode, sort of like if a person is stranded in the desert and comes across a person who has water but refuses to share.

“That person stranded in the desert would probably kill the other person,” Bennett said.

Recovery addicts have expressed shameful deeds to Bennett. Things they would have never done if they were in the right state of mind.

Meth addicts come from all walks of life. “Rich people, poor people, black people, white people, preachers, police men, teachers, just about every person out there,” he said. “But there are all kinds of success stories of people that have turned their life around and do good.”