

# **Mobile County Sheriff's Office Meth Reduction Initiative**

## **Summary**

### **Scanning**

In 2006-2007, the illegal production and use of Methamphetamine in the State of Alabama especially Mobile County grew at an epidemic rate. What was once a small, rural, isolated problem dominated by “biker types” had become a large, urban, multi-user, multi-manufacturer drug epidemic. During this time the Mobile County Sheriff Office (MCSO) noted a sharp spike in the number of arrests on Methamphetamine related offenses and clandestine Methamphetamine laboratory (labs) seizures throughout the county. Mobile County Sheriff Deputies were finding these highly dangerous and volatile Methamphetamine labs in wooded areas, motel rooms, the trunks of vehicles, neighborhood homes and in apartments.

### **Analysis**

The Methamphetamine problem was analyzed a variety of ways, including surveys of inmates in the Mobile County Metro Jail, interviews with a retired DEA agent, current and previous drug statistics for Mobile County, research of existing state laws that apply to Methamphetamine and its precursors and previous Meth Initiative Grant submission to COPS. MCSO analyzed its own drug enforcement tactics and procedures. Eventually, it was decided that a new proactive strategy that was community based was the best way to proceed.

## **Response**

In 2006, MCSO created a sub-unit within the Narcotics unit to concentrate of Methamphetamine crimes. The unit worked on shutting down the sales of Methamphetamine and its response to suspected labs. By 2007, it was determined that this approach was not going to slow down the spread of Methamphetamine; it was reactive when this problem needed a proactive approach.

So in 2008, MCSO attacked the problem from several different avenues. MCSO started a multi-faceted awareness campaign, partnered with local communities groups, law enforcement agencies, business and the general public, created a database to track precursor drug sales and enforce compliance with Alabama precursor laws and regulations.

## **Assessment**

- MCSO has tracked approximately 1 million pseudoephedrine sales.
- Decreased the amount pseudoephedrine sold in Mobile County.
- MCSO shares its database with surrounding municipal police departments, adjoining county sheriff's offices, law enforcement agencies in the state of Mississippi along the Alabama/Mississippi line, local federal law enforcement agencies.
- Increased the number of Methamphetamine related arrests.
- Increased the number of Methamphetamine labs seized.
- Educated the public on the dangers of Methamphetamine.
- Partner with businesses and the public by having them provide real time information to MCSO.

## **Project Description**

### **Scanning**

Mobile County is the second largest county in the state of Alabama. Mobile County has a population of 411,721 people. Mobile County's land area is 1,233 square miles. It is bordered on the north by Washington County, south by the Gulf of Mexico, west by the state of Mississippi and east by Baldwin County. In the years prior to 2006, Mobile County had a very small problem with the use, sale or manufacturing of Methamphetamine. The percentage of time and case load related to Methamphetamine was so minor that specific statistics related to Methamphetamine were not kept.

Then in 2006, the MCSO Narcotics Unit noticed that the number of Methamphetamine cases were on the rise. Mobile County experienced a series of explosions that were related to small Methamphetamine labs. In 2006, MCSO's Narcotics Unit seized 29 pounds 12 ounces of methamphetamines and more than 1 gallon of methamphetamine oil. MCSO's Narcotics Unit also discovered 17 working labs. MCSO also saw firsthand the violence and dangers that methamphetamine brings; MCSO had a deputy shot (Corporal Roy Cuthkelvin) during a search warrant on a working methamphetamine lab, a deputy injured (Deputy Wayne Goolsby) by chemicals in clean-up of a Methamphetamine lab and deputies involved in two separate officer-involved shootings with a subjects high on Methamphetamine.

MCSO was not seeing any evidence that the influx of Methamphetamine was being brought in from outside the county. It was obvious that the majority of the Methamphetamine that was being seized was made in small "Mom and Pop" labs within Mobile County. MCSO created a Meth unit within its Narcotics Unit. The Meth unit sole responsibility was to work on

Methamphetamine related cases. The Meth unit followed up on tips of Methamphetamine labs and Methamphetamine distributors. The Investigators assigned to the Meth units deployed traditional drug enforcement techniques. These techniques proved to be ineffective.

The problem, MCSO was always reactive to the Methamphetamine. With the seller being able to collect the ingredients and produce their own Methamphetamine, traditional narcotic investigative techniques were not effective. The desire of Mobile County Sheriff Sam Cochran was for MCSO to be proactive in its fight against Methamphetamines; to reduce the amount of Methamphetamine in the county not to just make arrests after a lab had exploded. This called for a new approach; one that included an awareness program, multi-agency cooperation, the use of technology and getting local businesses and the public to join MCSO in the effort to eliminate Methamphetamine.

### **Analysis**

MCSO conducted a survey related to the availability of Methamphetamines and its precursors and administered it to inmates in the Mobile County Metro Jail. MCSO received 327 completed surveys. The results of those surveys were that the inmates found:

- Methamphetamine was relatively easy to acquire in Mobile County.
- Precursor Chemicals were relatively easy to obtain.
- Whites were more likely to use Methamphetamine than non-whites
- If they knew that the purchase of precursors were being tracked they felt that there would be a higher degree of likelihood of getting arrested.
- Methamphetamine manufacture and sales are primarily done through small and medium independent labs (Often referred to as “Mom and Pop” labs) locally (See appendix D).

MCSO looked at previous year drug enforcement statistics for Mobile County. The statistic disclosed no availability of methamphetamine possession, distribution or manufacturing. MCSO was facing a new problem that until recently did not exist.

MCSO interviewed recently retired DEA agent Joe Bettner. Bettner had great insight into the problems that Mobile County was facing. Bettner was hired as a civilian consultant to help guide the new initiative.

MCSO believed that the increase was due to Methamphetamine being a relatively cheap drug that can easily be manufactured. The ingredients needed to manufacture Methamphetamine could easily be obtained from local stores. The ingredients or precursors (See appendix A) were cheap and could be purchased in quantity without question. The procedure to manufacture Methamphetamine could easily be downloaded from the internet.

### **Response**

In 2006, Sheriff Cochran assembled a team to discuss the growing problem of Methamphetamine within Mobile County. The team consisted of staff members and deputies from the MCSO. The team was to come up with a proactive plan to combat and reduce the use and production of Methamphetamine within Mobile County. The team looked at the current Alabama state laws that related to illegal drugs and specifically Methamphetamine to see what avenues were available. The team concentrated on a state law (20-2-190) that placed controls and reporting/tracking requirements on medication containing Pseudoephedrine, a precursor. The team decided that since the majority of the Methamphetamine was being made locally in small “Mom and Pop” labs the best strategy would be to reduce the availability of the precursors needed to manufacture Methamphetamine. The strategy was broken into three phases; create a

multi-faceted awareness campaign, partner with local communities, law enforcement agencies, businesses and the general public, create a database to track precursor drug sales and enforce compliance with Alabama precursor laws and regulations.

The awareness campaign took many forms; education, billboards, web-site, computer programs, etc. Multi-faceted education programs were created with the goal to reach as many people over different age groups. The education was also divided amongst different areas that surround Methamphetamine; the dangers of the drug, signs to look for if you suspect someone of using Methamphetamine and what to look for if you suspect a Methamphetamine lab exist. MCSO partnered with the Drug Education Counsel to accomplish this.

The MCSO Methamphetamine Initiative resulted in bringing the Methamphetamine drug problem in our area and State wide to the attention of all stake holders which include the community, law enforcement and political leaders. Public awareness and political support to combat this epidemic in our community is a direct result of this MCSO initiative.

The first phase of Awareness/Education was to educate people of the dangers of using methamphetamine. The primary target of this phase was school age children. This was done through drug awareness classes and lectures at local high schools, elementary schools, youth groups, civic groups and church groups. Age appropriate video and hand-out material accompanied the classroom lectures. The materials were given to the children for him/her to use as a future reference. In addition, children were given stickers, huggers and pencils with anti-drug slogans printed on them.

The next phase was to hold awareness classes geared towards adults. These classes were held at civic groups, Drug Education Council, schools, etc. These classes focused not only on the

dangers of the use of Methamphetamine but also on the signs that someone may be using Methamphetamine. There was also a section on the indicators of an active methamphetamine lab.

The next phase of Awareness/Education was geared towards local businesses. MCSO prepared training material (See appendix B) and trained 27 MCSO uniformed deputies on Methamphetamine compliance laws/regulations, precursors for Methamphetamine production and supplied the deputies with printed material and other media material to distribute to the local retailers and citizens informing them of suspicious behavior/activity which could be indicative of Methamphetamine production. Videos, power point presentations and handouts were used to compliment the lecture. Training was offered to businesses that sell certain precursor items (Sudafed, Anhydrous Ammonia, Butane gas, etc.) to educate the employees on the items and amounts needed to manufacture Methamphetamine. MCSO's intent was to get the businesses involved in the fight against Methamphetamine. The employees were encouraged by the visiting deputy to report any suspicious transactions/activities to MCSO either through the Meth Text tip line or via the MCSO Suspicious Transaction Report Form (See appendix C) which was supplied to all retailers of Pseudoephedrine products by the deputies who were assigned to visit the retailer for compliance checks.

MCSO continues to receive Suspicious Transactions Reports from all retailers throughout the county, to include pharmacies, hardware stores, automotive stores, and agricultural feed stores. These Suspicious Transaction Reports are logged into a data base by the MCSO Narcotic Unit and utilized as an additional intelligence resource in ongoing drug investigations.

MCSO keeps storeowners and store employees up to date on new methods of manufacturing Methamphetamine. A prime example of the information that was passed on is the change in the

use of certain precursors. Currently, MCSO is seeing labs that have switched from using Anhydrous Ammonia to Butane gas. The use of Anhydrous Ammonia to manufacture Methamphetamines has received a lot of media attention and has become common knowledge. The substitute of Butane isn't readily known and acquiring large amounts of Butane is easy and it does not cause suspicion.

MCSO also used multi-media devices to get Methamphetamine awareness information distributed. MCSO placed statistics, pictures, data and video on it's website in reference to the use and manufacturing of Methamphetamine. MCSO held press conferences to publicize the success of the Meth Text program. MCSO also placed anti-drug/Methamphetamine billboards along thoroughfares throughout Mobile County. MCSO supplied personnel, pamphlets and brochures in kiosks at local events to distribute Methamphetamine information.

The partnering phase was broken down into several categories. First MCSO partnered with local businesses. MCSO needed businesses that sold Pseudoephedrine to cooperate in sharing information. There is a state law which forces businesses to report the required information. A true partnership where the businesses bought in voluntarily to provide the information and understand the importance of providing the information made the project more effective. In addition to the information the businesses had to provide by law, MCSO wanted more information. The cashier was trained and asked to advise investigators of suspicious purchase of large quantities of precursors not covered under the reporting law.

Partnerships were established with other law enforcement agencies. MCSO and these other law enforcement agencies began sharing information of drug suspects and known "pill shoppers". Eventually it was discovered that the agencies were dealing with several of the same

people. Soon the agencies began sharing the databases used for tracking the sale of Pseudoephedrine.

MCSO also partnered with the Drug Education Counsel to assist in the awareness campaign. Members of the Drug Education Counsel held classes on behalf of MCSO.

Lastly, MCSO had to make a partnership with the general public. MCSO had to show the public that without their assistance this program would not be successful. Sheriff Cochran held multiple press conferences to unveil a new texting program that the public could use to provide MCSO with anonymous information related to Methamphetamine. The goal of the texting program was to make it easy for the public to pass on information to MCSO. The public had to buy into the texting program. They had to see that MCSO was taking their information seriously and that something was being done with the information they provided. The texting program was set up where the information would immediately be sent to the appropriate investigator. The investigator receiving the information would evaluate the information and take appropriate action immediately.

The text program was set up so that the public could report the use, sale or manufacturing of Methamphetamine at a single number. The program provided feedback to the individual by routing the message to the correct investigator. When the reportee sends a text to the number they receive a response asking whether they are reporting the use, sale or manufacturing of Methamphetamine. The individual will then reply to the text with the number that correlates to their information. The program sends back a text with questions the investigator would like answered. The individual can then provide their information. That information is sent to the

appropriate investigator. The investigator will take action on the information immediately any time of the day.

The tracking of precursors and enforcement of Alabama state laws and regulations phase was also broken into sections. First, MCSO would continue to make arrest for possession and manufacturing of Methamphetamine. Next, MCSO would enforce the state law requiring the logging and reporting of the purchase of items containing Pseudoephedrine. MCSO began by sending deputies to the different business to make sure that they were familiar and following the state law. Once the businesses were made aware of the reporting requirements, deputies would routinely stop by the stores and collect the reports. The Narcotics Investigators determined the individuals were going to several stores and purchasing items that contain Pseudoephedrine often referred to as pill shopping. These individuals will purchase quantities that obviously are not the legal intent of the medication. These individuals will purchase enough medication to fight a cold or allergy for hundreds of people. Narcotics Investigators were able to start tracking the individuals. Soon Narcotic Investigators were able to link the individuals who were pill shopping to known Methamphetamine manufacturers. This tool turned out to be of great use to MCSO. MCSO was able to deploy its resources on a more systematic basis. MCSO began keeping the information electronically which made the information easier to use. Soon, several of the businesses agreed to start sending their reports electronically. This saved on manpower and allows the information to be shared with other law enforcement agencies.

MCSO currently tracks Pseudoephedrine sales of 88 pharmacies located in Mobile County and 47 pharmacies located in Baldwin County. It should be noted that in addition to the 135 pharmacies located in Mobile and Baldwin County, MCSO identified 435 non-pharmacy type stores who were licensed by the Alabama ABC Board to sale Pseudoephedrine products.

Through strict compliance and enforcement initiatives by the MCSO this number was reduced to less than 50 non-pharmacy type stores by 2009.

MCSO implemented the Pseudoephedrine sales tracking database in May of 2008. The database was designed to identify and ferret out individuals who were violating State and Federal Pseudoephedrine reporting laws by traveling to multiple pharmacies and purchasing medications containing pseudoephedrine for the purpose of illegally manufacturing Methamphetamine. During an assessment of the effectiveness of the database in September of 2009, sales of medications containing Pseudoephedrine dropped as much as 40 % in some pharmacies in the Mobile County area. All of the pharmacies in the Mobile County area reflected significant reductions in sales, as a direct result of the database.

The MCSO Meth database is web based and was designed to support sharing of information with other law enforcement agencies in the tracking of Pseudoephedrine sales throughout the State of Alabama. MCSO has also given access to the database to law enforcement agencies from surrounding states such as Mississippi and Florida. The joint effort of these agencies has assisted in the identification of individuals involved in multi-state Pseudoephedrine pill shopping operations.

Some of the tools employed in the MCSO Meth database design are as follows:

- \* Triggers are incorporated to activate automatically when a person purchases in excess of the daily or monthly limits of medication containing Pseudoephedrine from a pharmacy or other licensed retailer of Pseudoephedrine medications which are regulated by State and Federal Law.

\* Investigative triggers can be set by investigators to activate on a particular individual they have investigative intelligence on and desires to know if that particular individual is involved in the purchase of Pseudoephedrine medications.

\* Automatic triggers (Hits) are incorporated in the program to activate anytime an individual purchase any over the counter Pseudoephedrine medications tracked by the data base that either has an active arrest warrant at the MCSO or has ever been booked into the Mobile County Metro Jail.

\* All preset triggers will result in an email being generated and sent to designated investigators. The "Investigative hits" will be sent only to the investigator who generated the watch. Warrants or arrest history will also be sent via email to the investigator. Additionally, purchase occurrence triggers which are activated will display the occurrence trigger amount which was exceeded, and the total weight of pseudoephedrine product involved which has been purchased by an individual during a thirty (30) day period.

\* Emails which are generated to an investigator contain a link which will automatically take them back to the data entry which generated the email hit.

\* The MCSO Meth database contains a search screen which allows investigators/ intelligence analyst to search data by any field included in the Pseudoephedrine entry screen. Extensive analytical investigative reports can be extracted from the data base.

\* Presently the MCSO Meth database has captured almost 1 Million Pseudoephedrine sales since May of 2008.

## Assessment

- The MCSO Meth database in concert with the rest of the Methamphetamine reduction initiative has been instrumental in the identification and arrest of hundreds of individuals involved in the clandestine manufacturing, possession and distribution of Methamphetamine in Mobile County. Additionally, due to the designed accessibility of the database to other law enforcement agencies in Alabama and other states such as Mississippi and Florida, these law enforcement agencies have also greatly benefited from this unique investigative resource developed by the MCSO to combat the growing Methamphetamine epidemic. Presently, over thirty three different law enforcement agencies from Alabama, Mississippi and Florida are utilizing the MCSO Meth database in their Methamphetamine enforcement efforts.
- Since May of 2008, MCSO has tracked near 1 million Pseudoephedrine sales.
- By September 2009, the sales of medication with the ingredient Pseudoephedrine was down approximately 40% from 2008 when the project started.
- In 2008 there were 108 arrests for possession or manufacturing of Methamphetamine. In 2009, that number increased to 119 arrests. In 2010, arrests again increased to 204. All of the arrests were made by investigators of the Narcotics units (arrests made by the patrol division are not included).
- From 2008-2010, 185 labs have been seized by MCSO's Narcotics unit (seizures made by the patrol division are not included).
- Decrease in the number of non-pharmacy stores that were licensed to sale Pseudoephedrine products from 435 to 50 in approximately 18 months.

- MCSO administered a second survey to inmates in the Mobile County Metro Jail. This time MCSO received 387 responses. The results of the survey were that Methamphetamines and its precursors had become more difficult to acquire.

## **Agency and Officer Information**

### **Key Project Team Members**

Chief Deputy David Wilhelm

Commander Rassic Smith, Sr

Sergeant Mark Hebert

Intelligence Officer Beth Norman

### **Project Contact Person**

Joe Bettner  
Methamphetamine Coordinator  
Mobile County Sheriff's Office  
Narcotics Unit  
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# APPENDIX A

## METHAMPHETAMINE PRECURSORS

### Precursors

**Items to watch for:**

- Common cold pills containing ephedrine or pseudoephedrine
- Acetone
- Alcohol (Gasoline, Antifreeze or Rubbing)
- Toluene (Paint Thinner)
- Engine Starter (Fuel)
- Drain Cleaner (Sulfuric Acid)
- Coffee Filters
- Iodine (Tap Water Product)
- Salt (Sodium Chloride)
- Batteries (Lithium)
- Propane Tank (Sulphur Hexafluoride)
- Lye (Sodium Hydroxide)
- Matches (Sulfur Hexafluoride)
- Dishes (Sulfur Hexafluoride)
- Muriatic Acid



## APPENDIX B

### BUSINESS AWARENES POSTERS

**ATTENTION  
EMPLOYEES**

**Methamphetamine manufacturing is on the rise**

**Items to watch for:**

- Cold and asthma tablets containing pseudoephedrine and ephedrine
- Rubbing and isopropyl alcohol.
- Iodine
- Starter fluid (ether)
- Gas additives (methanol)
- Drain cleaner
- Muratic acid
- Brake cleaner (toluene)
- Lithium batteries
- Rock salt
- Matchbooks (red phosphorous)
- Lye
- Paint thinner
- Aluminum foil
- Glassware
- Coffee filters
- Propane tanks



*Take a look at these common household items. Most of our valued customers buy these products on a regular basis and for and for the intended use.*

Some people, however, see something quite different. Their intent is to make illegal drugs such as methamphetamine or "meth." Frequent or large quantity purchases of these and similar products may be a sign of illegal drug manufacturing.

*Be aware, but be smart!* Don't take matters into your own hands. Don't confront the purchaser. Inform your manager of suspicious activity. Or, call the Mobile County Sheriff's Office at: 574-8633.

For more information contact the Mobile County Sheriff's Office Methamphetamine Reduction Coordinator Joseph Bettner @ 251-574-8029 or [jbettner@mobileso.com](mailto:jbettner@mobileso.com)

**Mobile County Sheriff's Office  
Methamphetamine Reduction Initiative**



## Types of Suspicious Activity (What to look for)

- Mutilated, fake, altered IDs.
- Trying to obscure the log.
- Timing their purchases to the maximum limits.
- Customers from other parts of the county, other counties or other states.
  - Passed numerous pharmacies to get to you.
- Showing up only on days when a shipment of PSE products arrive.
- Faking illnesses which would be treated with PSE products.
- Purchasing previously mentioned other precursors products for the manufacturing of meth along with PSE purchases.

**APPENDIX C**

Suspicious Transaction Form

# Suspicious Transaction Form

- **SUSPICIOUS TRANSACTION REPORT**

- Methamphetamine manufacturers can produce large quantities of methamphetamine by using legal, over-the-counter products located in your stores. Please fill out the following information if you suspect someone is involved in the illegal production of methamphetamine. Additionally, you should contact your local law enforcement officials and provide them with the information that you have noted.

- **Business Name, Store Number, and Store Location:**

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

- **Employee Name, Date and Time of Contact:**

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

- **Security Photo/Photo Available: Yes or No**

- **Suspect Information:** Name (if known) \_\_\_\_\_

- Height \_\_\_\_\_ Weight \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_ Race \_\_\_\_\_ Sex \_\_\_\_\_ Build \_\_\_\_\_

- Hair Color \_\_\_\_\_ Hair Length \_\_\_\_\_ Facial Hair \_\_\_\_\_

- Other Information \_\_\_\_\_

- **Financial Information:** Cash Payment \_\_\_\_\_ Receipt \_\_\_\_\_ Credit Payment \_\_\_\_\_

- Check Payment \_\_\_\_\_ Name \_\_\_\_\_ Address \_\_\_\_\_

- **Vehicle Information:** Make \_\_\_\_\_ Model \_\_\_\_\_ Color \_\_\_\_\_

- Vehicle Plate # \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

- Other Information \_\_\_\_\_

- **Chemical Purchased:** Pseudoephedrine \_\_\_\_\_ Heet \_\_\_\_\_ Lithium Batteries \_\_\_\_\_ Starting Fluid/Ether \_\_\_\_\_

- Camping Fuel \_\_\_\_\_ Iodine \_\_\_\_\_ Matches \_\_\_\_\_ Acetone \_\_\_\_\_ Alcohol \_\_\_\_\_ Acid \_\_\_\_\_ Fuel Additives \_\_\_\_\_

- Drain Cleaners \_\_\_\_\_ Coffee Filters \_\_\_\_\_

- Other Information: \_\_\_\_\_

- **NOTE: Please follow your store policies related to reporting suspicious transactions. Please do not confront the purchaser without the assistance of law enforcement. Please complete as much information on this form as is possible. *Mobile County Sheriff's Office***

- **Methamphetamine Reduction Initiative**

- **Phone # 251-574-6402**

- **Fax # 251-574-3320**

## **APPENDIX D**

### MANUFACTUREING OF METHAMPHETAMINES

**Meth Charges  
Manufacture of Meth  
January 2008 to June 2009**

