

MONDAY

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## New weapon in war on meth

Meter readers trained to watch for suspicious signs - and stay safe

By Nate Carlisle  
The Salt Lake Tribune

They already travel the city looking at homes and talking with residents.

So Salt Lake City has decided its water meter readers might as well be keeping an eye open for one of Utah's biggest problems - methamphetamine.

This spring, the men and women who read 90,000 water meters a month in Salt Lake City and Salt Lake County have been taught to also read signs that a meth lab is operating in a home.

"This is good for us because it not only helps us protect our employees, but also helps protect the community," said Jim Lewis, finance administrator for the Salt Lake City Department of Public Utilities.

The goal of the training wasn't just to find and bust meth makers - one narcotics detective doesn't think the readers will yield any tips about the transient labs. It also was designed to keep the readers safe.

Cooking meth, which can be made with chemicals such as industrial fertilizer, brake fluid and drain cleaner, produces toxic byproducts that can injure or kill anyone stumbling upon them.

"It's nice to know some of the signs," said Dustin Gilgen, a meter reader. "That way, you can pay a little more attention."

Meth training for meter readers began with the Salt Lake City Council, which wanted readers to recognize dangers and nuisances.

Councilwoman Nancy Saxton, who pushed for the initiative, said she wants city employees watching for meth and things like snow on sidewalks and garbage in streets.

"I feel that it's our responsibility as a city to keep an eye on those things if they're blatant quality of life issues," Saxton said.

In March, two representatives from the Salt Lake City Police Department gave the readers the same half-day presentation on meth they give to other community groups. The readers learned to watch for empty bottles of gasoline treatment, an ingredient, and exhaust pipes with bags of Kitty Litter on the end.

The litter helps disguise the meth smell, and the bag collects the toxic gasses the cooking produces.

Lewis said most of Salt Lake's water meters are in front yards or parking strips, but there is still a percentage located in back yards and a handful inside homes. Lewis said readers have never reported a meth site.

Salt Lake City Police Sgt. Ryan Atack, who works in the department's



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narcotics unit, was glad the readers received training, but doubted they would produce any tips.

Few meth manufacturers cook indoors anymore, the sergeant said, and if they do, it's only for about three days and then they move to another site.

But Gilgen said he still appreciates the training. "There's always the possibility," he said. "You just never know."

Lewis said meter readers also receive training on such things as safety around dogs and reporting emergencies.

Utah Power and Questar Gas said they train their meter readers to report various emergencies, but have not given them specific training for meth.

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What to look for

Here are some signs that, if seen in combination, indicate a methamphetamine lab may be in use in a residence.

- 1 Windows blackened or curtains always drawn.
- 1 Occupants go outside the house to smoke cigarettes.
- 1 Chemical odors coming from the house, garage or detached buildings.
- 1 Garbage contains numerous bottles, containers and materials such as industrial fertilizer, household cleaners, automotive products, cold medications.
- 1 Coffee filters, bed sheets or other material stained from filtering red phosphorous or other chemicals.
- 1 Occupants set their garbage out for pickup in another neighbor's collection area.
- 1 Evidence of chemical waste dumping such as burn sites.
- 1 Occupants unfriendly, appear secretive about activities, display paranoid or odd behavior.
- 1 Extreme security at home or signs that indicate "Private Property" or "Beware of Dog."

Source: <http://www.streetdrugs.org>.

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