WARNING SIGNS OF DRUG ACTIVITY

The sooner it is recognized, the faster it can be stopped.

COMPLAINTS WE HAVE HEARD:

The neighbors tell me my tenants are dealing drugs. But I drove by three different times and didn’t see a thing.

ADVICE WE WERE GIVEN:

You’ve got to give up being naive. We could stop a lot more of it if more people knew what to look for. Narcotics detective

THE DRUGS

While many illegal drugs are sold on the street today, the following are most common:

Cocaine and Crack. Cocaine is a stimulant. Nicknames include coke, nose candy, blow, snow, and a variety of others. At one time cocaine was quite expensive and generally out of reach for people of low incomes. Today, the price has dropped to the point that it can be purchased by all economic levels. Cocaine in its powder form is usually taken nasally (snorted). Less frequently, it is injected.

Crack, a derivative of cocaine, produces a more intense but shorter high. Among other nicknames, it is also known as rock. Crack is manufactured from cocaine and baking soda. The process requires does not produce any of the toxic waste problems associated with methamphetamine production. Because crack delivers a high using less cocaine, it costs less per dose, making it particularly attractive to drug users with low incomes. Crack is typically smoked in small glass pipes.

Powdered cocaine has the look and consistency of baking soda and is often sold in small, folded paper packets. Crack has the look of a small piece of old, dried soap. Crack is often sold in tiny Ziploc bags, little glass vials, balloons, or even as is with no container at all.

In general, signs of cocaine usage are not necessarily apparent to observers. A combination of the following is possible: regular late-night activity (e.g., after midnight on weeknights), highly talkative behavior, paranoid behavior, constant sniffing or bloody noses (for intense users of powdered cocaine).

Powdered cocaine usage crosses all social and economic levels. Crack usage is so far associated with lower income levels. While Los Angeles style gangs (Bloods and Crips) have made crack popular, other groups and individuals have begun manufacturing and selling the drug as well.

Methamphetamine. Methamphetamine is a stimulant. Nicknames include: meth, crank, speed, crystal, STP, and others. Until the price of cocaine began dropping, meth was known as the poor
mans cocaine. Meth is usually ingested, snorted, or injected. A new, more dangerous form of methamphetamine, crystal meth or ice, can be smoked. So far, the feared rise in ice usage has not been observed.

Pharmaceutical grade meth is a dry, white crystalline powder. While some methamphetamine sold on the street is white, much of it is yellowish, or even brown, and is sometimes of the consistency of damp powdered sugar. The drug has a strong medicinal smell. It is often sold in tiny, sealable plastic bags.

Hard-core meth addicts get very little sleep and they look it. Chronic users and cooks—those who manufacture the drug—may have open sores on their skin, bad teeth, and generally appear unclean. Paranoid behavior combined with regular late-night activity are potential indicators. Occasional users may not show obvious signs.

Cooks tend to be lower-income and may have an unpleasant urine smell about them. While many types of individuals are involved in meth production, the activity is particularly common among some outlaw motorcycle gangs.

*Because of the toxic waste dangers associated with methamphetamine production, we have included additional information on dealing with methamphetamine labs in a separate chapter.*

**Tar Heroin.** Fundamentally, heroin is a powerful painkiller—both emotionally and physically. Nicknames include brown sugar, Mexican tar, chiva, horse, smack, H, and various others. Heroin is typically injected.

Tar heroin has the look of creosote off a telephone pole, or instant coffee melted with only a few drops of water. The drug has a strong vinegar smell. It is typically sold in small amounts, wrapped in tinfoil or plastic. Paraphernalia that might be observed include hypodermic needles with a brown liquid residue, spoons that are blackened on the bottom, and blackened cotton balls.

When heroin addicts are on the drug, they appear disconnected and sleepy. They can fade out, or even fall asleep, while having a conversation. While heroin began as a drug of the wealthy, it has become a drug for those who have little income or are unemployed. Heroin addicts don’t care about very much but their next fix and their clothes and demeanor reflect it. When they are not high, addicts can become quite aggressive. As with most needle users, you will rarely see a heroin user wearing a short-sleeved shirt.

**Marijuana.** Marijuana is also known as grass, weed, reefer, joint, J, Mary Jane, cannabis, and many others. Marijuana is smoked from a pipe or a rolled cigarette, and typically produces a mellow high. However, the type and power of the high varies significantly with the strength and strain of the drug.

The marijuana grown today is far more powerful than the drug that became popular in the late 60s and early 70s. Growers have developed more sophisticated ways to control growth of the plants and cause high output of the resin that contains THC—the ingredient that gives marijuana its potency. Today’s marijuana is often grown indoors to gain greater control over the crop and to prevent detection by competitors, animals, or law enforcement. It takes 90 to 180 days to bring the crops from seed to harvest.
Users generally appear disconnected and non-aggressive. The users eyes may also appear bloodshot or dilated. Usage of marijuana crosses all social and economic levels.

**WARNING SIGNS IN RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY: DEALING, DISTRIBUTION, GROW OPERATIONS, LABS**

The following list describes signs of drug activity that either you or neighbors may observe. As the list will show, many indicators are visible at times when the landlord is not present. This is one reason why a solid partnership with trusted neighbors is important.

Note also, while some of the indicators are reasonably conclusive in and of themselves, others should be considered significant only if multiple factors are present.

This list is primarily targeted to tenant activity.

**DEALING**

Dealers sell to the end user so they typically sell small quantities to many purchasers. Dealing locations are like convenience stores, there is a high customer traffic with each customer buying a small amount.

*Neighbors may observe:*

- **Heavy traffic.** Cars and pedestrians stopping at a home for only brief periods. Traffic may be cyclical, increasing on weekends or late at night, or minimal for a few weeks and then intense for a period of a few days particularly pay days.

- **Exchanges of money.** Cash and packets traded through windows, mail slots, or under doorways.

- **Lack of familiarity.** Visitors appear to be acquaintances rather than friends.

- **People bring valuables into the unit.** Visitors regularly bring televisions, bikes, VCRs, cameras and leave empty-handed.

- **Odd car behavior.** Visitors may sit in the car for a while after leaving the residence or may leave one person in the car while the other visits. Visitors may also park around a corner or a few blocks away and approach on foot.

- **Lookouts.** Frequently these will be younger people who tend to hang around the rental during heavy traffic hours.
Regular activity at extremely late hours. For example, frequent commotion between midnight and 4:00 in the morning on weeknights. (Both cocaine and methamphetamine are stimulants users tend to stay up at night.)

Various obvious signs. This may include people exchanging small packets for cash, people using drugs while sitting in their cars, syringes left in common areas or on neighboring property, or other paraphernalia lying about.

Landlords may observe:

Failure to meet responsibilities. Failure to pay utility bills or rent, failure to maintain the unit in appropriate condition, general damage to the property. Some dealers smoke or inject much of their profits as they get more involved in the drugs, they are more likely to ignore bills, maintenance, and housekeeping.

DISTRIBUTION

Distributors are those who sell larger quantities of drugs to individual dealers or other, smaller distributors. They are the wholesale component, while dealers are the retail component. If the distributors are not taking the drugs themselves, they can be difficult to identify. A combination of the following indicators may be significant:

Expensive vehicles. Particularly when owned by people otherwise associated with a lower standard of living. Some distributors make it a practice to spend their money on items that are easily moved so they might drive a $50,000 car while renting a $20,000 unit.

Pagers and cellular phones. Particularly when used by people who have no visible means of support.

A tendency to make frequent late-night trips. Many people work swing shifts or have other legitimate reasons to come and go at late hours. However, if you are seeing a number of other signs along with frequent late-night trips, this could be an indicator.

Secretive loading of vehicles. Trucks, trailers, or cars being loaded and unloaded late at night in a hurried, clandestine manner. Load and distribution houses (most likely to be found in border states) are essentially repackaging locations and involve moving large quantities of drugs.

MARIJUANA GROW OPERATIONS

Grow operations are hard to identify from the street. They are more likely to be found in single-family residential units than in apartments. In addition to the general signs of excessive fortifications or overly paranoid behavior, other signs are listed below.
Neighbors may observe:

- **Electrical wiring that has been tampered with.** For example, evidence of residents tampering with wiring and hooking directly into power lines.

- **Powerful lights on all night in the attic or basement.** Growers will be using powerful lights to speed the development of the plants.

Landlords may observe:

- **A sudden jump in utility bills.** Grow operations require strong lighting.

- **A surprisingly high humidity level in the unit.** Grow operations require a lot of moisture. In addition to feeling the humidity, landlords may observe peeling paint or mildewed wallboard or carpet.

**METH LABS**

Once a meth cook has collected the chemicals and set up the equipment, it doesn’t take long to make the drugs—about 12 hours for one batch. Clandestine labs have been set up in all manner of living quarters, from hotel rooms and RVs, to single-family rentals or apartment units. Lab operators favor units that offer extra privacy. In rural settings it’s barns or houses well away from other residences. In urban settings it might be houses with plenty of trees and shrubs blocking the views, or apartment or hotel units that are well away from the easy view of management. However, while seclusion is preferred, clandestine labs have been found in virtually all types of rental units.

Neighbors may observe:

- **Strong ammonia smell.** Very similar to cat box odor (amalgam process of methamphetamine production).

- **Other odd chemical odors.** The smell of other chemicals or solvents not typically associated with residential housing.

- **Chemical containers.** Chemical drums or other chemical containers with their labels painted over.

- **Smoke breaks.** If other suspicious signs are present, individuals leaving the premises just long enough to smoke a cigarette may also be an indicator. Ether is used in meth production. Ether is highly explosive. Methamphetamine cooks get away from it before lighting up.
Landlords may observe:

- **Strong unpleasant/chemical odors.** A particularly strong cat box/ammonia smell within the rental may indicate usage of the amalgam process for methamphetamine production. The odor of ether, chloroform, or other solvents may also be present.

- **Chemistry equipment.** The presence of flasks, beakers, and rubber tubing consistent with high school chemistry classes. Very few people practice chemistry as a hobby if you see such articles, don’t take it lightly.

- **A maroon-colored residue on aluminum sashes or other aluminum materials in the unit.** The ephedrine process of methamphetamine production is a more expensive process, but it does not give off the telltale ammonia/cat box odor. However the hydroiodic acid involved does eat metals and, in particular, leaves a maroon residue on aluminum.

- **Bottles or jugs used extensively for secondary purposes.** For example, milk jugs and screw top beer bottles full of mysterious liquids.

- **Discarded chemistry equipment.** Garbage containing broken flasks, beakers, tubing, or other chemical paraphernalia.

**Note:** If you have reason to believe there is a meth lab on your property, leave immediately, wash your face and hands, and call the narcotics division of your local law enforcement agency to report what you know. If you have reason to believe your exposure has been extensive, contact your doctor—some of the chemicals involved are highly toxic. For more information about meth labs, see the chapter on clandestine drug labs.
**GENERAL WARNING SIGNS OF DRUG ACTIVITY**

The following may apply to dealing, distribution, or manufacturing.

**Neighbors may observe:**

- **Expensive vehicles.** Regular visits by people in extremely expensive cars to renters who appear to be significantly impoverished.

- **A dramatic drop in activity after police are called.** If activity stops after police have been called, but before they arrive, this may indicate usage of a radio scanner, monitoring police bands.

- **Unusually strong fortification of the unit.** Blacked-out windows, window bars, extra deadbolts, surprising amounts spent on alarm systems. Note that grow operators and meth cooks, in particular, often emphasize fortifications extra locks and thorough window coverings are typical.

- **Frequent late-night motorcycle or bicycle trips.** This would only be a significant sign if the trips are made from a location where other indicators of drug activity are also observed.

- **Firearms.** Particularly assault weapons and those that have been modified for concealment, such as sawed-off shotguns.

**Landlords may observe:**

- **A willingness to pay rent months in advance, particularly in cash.** If an applicant offers you six months rent in advance, resist the urge to accept, and require the person to go through the application process. By accepting the cash without checking, you might have more money in the short run, but your rental may suffer damage, and you may also damage the livability of the neighborhood and the value of your long-term investment.

- **A tendency to pay in cash combined with a lack of visible means of support.** Some honest people simply don’t like writing checks, so cash payments by themselves certainly don’t indicate illegal activity. However, if other signs are also noted, and there are large amounts of cash with no apparent source of income, get suspicious.

- **Unusual fortification of individual rooms.** For example, dead bolts or alarms on interior doors.

- **Willingness to install expensive exterior fortifications.** If your tenants offer to pay surprisingly high dollar amounts to install window bars and other exterior fortifications, they may be interested in more than prevention of the average burglary.

- **Presence of any obvious evidence.** Bags of white powder, syringes, marijuana plants, etc. Also note that very small plastic bags the type that jewelry or beads are sometimes kept in are not generally used in quantities by most people. The presence of such bags, combined with other factors, should cause suspicion.

- **Unusually sophisticated weigh scales.** The average home might have a food scale or a letter scale perhaps accurate to an ounce. The scales typically used by drug dealers, distributors, and manufacturers are noticeably more sophisticated accurate to gram weights and smaller. (Of course, there are legitimate reasons to have such scales as well, so don’t consider a scale by itself, as an indicator.)

- **Large amounts of tinfoil, baking soda, or electrical cords.** Tinfoil is used in grow operations and meth production. Baking soda is used in meth production and in the process of converting cocaine to crack. Electrical cords are used in meth labs and grow operations.
Disclosures required for transfer of property where methamphetamine production occurred.

441.236. In the event that any premises to be rented, leased, sold, transferred or conveyed is or was used as a site for methamphetamine production, the owner, seller, landlord or other transferor shall disclose in writing to the prospective lessee, purchaser or transferee the fact that methamphetamine was produced on the premises, provided that the owner, seller, landlord or other transferor has knowledge of such prior methamphetamine production. The owner shall disclose any prior knowledge of methamphetamine production, regardless of whether the persons involved in the production were convicted for such production.

(L. 2001 H.B. 471)

*Methamphetamine production, landlord to disclose to tenant such production and certain criminal convictions.

441.236. 1. In the event that any premises to be leased by a landlord is or was used as a site for methamphetamine production, the landlord shall disclose in writing to the tenant the fact that methamphetamine was produced on the premises, provided that the landlord had knowledge of such prior methamphetamine production. The landlord shall disclose any prior knowledge of methamphetamine production, regardless of whether the persons involved in the production were convicted for such production.

2. A landlord shall disclose in writing the fact that any premises to be leased by the landlord either was the place of residence of a person convicted of any of the following crimes, or was the storage site or laboratory for any of the substances for which a person was convicted of any of the following crimes, provided that the landlord knew or should have known of such convictions:

(1) Creation of a controlled substance in violation of section 195.420, RSMo;

(2) Possession of ephedrine with intent to manufacture methamphetamine in violation of section 195.246, RSMo;
(3) Unlawful use of drug paraphernalia with the intent to manufacture methamphetamine in violation of subsection 2 of section 195.233, RSMo;

(4) Endangering the welfare of a child by any of the means described in subdivision (4) or (5) of subsection 1 of section 568.045, RSMo; or

(5) Any other crime related to methamphetamine, its salts, optical isomers and salts of its optical isomers either in chapter 195, RSMo, or in any other provision of law.

(L. 2001 S.B. 89 & 37)

*This section was enacted by both H.B. 471 and S.B. 89 & 37 during the 1st Regular Session of the Ninety-first General Assembly, 2001. Due to possible conflict, both versions are printed here.