

# 1<sup>ST</sup> Responders Guide to Clandestine Laboratories

## OVERVIEW

Clandestine Laboratories are locations that utilize chemicals, supplies, and laboratory equipment for the specific production of illicit drugs, and will include at times, the use of chemicals to produce improvised explosives.”

First responders are not always trained or familiar with the behaviors or thought processes of individuals that operate illegal clandestine labs. Yet these individuals, who are both using and manufacturing narcotics or producing explosives, will have increased levels of paranoia, anger and mood swings. Many of them will resort to extreme measures to protect themselves and their labs; security systems, explosives, guns, attack dogs and poisonous snakes have all been found at Clandestine Laboratory sites across the nation.

The most common Clandestine Laboratories found in California are Methamphetamine (Meth) production labs. One danger associated with Meth labs that is not connected to the other illicit drug labs is the manufacturing process. Since Meth can be made from common ingredients, using readily available equipment, Clandestine Meth Laboratories appear and disappear everywhere. Being in or near a Meth lab is extremely dangerous – both while the drug is being cooked and after a lab has been deserted. During the preparation or “cook” of Meth product there is a risk of fire, explosion and exposure to toxic fumes. After a “cook”, the toxic nature of Meth drug production leaves behind hazardous waste; six pounds of residue are generated by each pound of Meth manufactured.

## INCIDENT ELEMENTS

The changes in society have resulted in changes to the role of California’s Emergency Responders. Everyday emergency responders are presented with dynamic situations that require they provide an “all hazard” response even though some local departments are not properly equipped or staffed to do so. With the threat of clandestine labs, our initial response personnel need to be prepared for anything and possess the essential skills necessary for incident recognition and possible stabilization, based on their resources and training.

The safety of emergency responders is the highest priority and it is important to identify common elements of a “Clandestine Lab Incident”. The common elements include training needs for the responders and operational needs of the incident.

Pre-incident training and preparedness drills should be conducted to build a close partnership with local, state and federal agencies. Develop good communication and working relationships with local agencies, as well as an understanding of operating guidelines between Fire, Law and EMS.

Operational considerations common to a clandestine lab incident can include, extended operational periods, unique logistical demands, scene integrity and control, time driven events, multiple staging areas and unified command.

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One vital step in preparing for a Clandestine Lab Incident is the development of a local emergency response plan. This plan should include a thorough and clear set of Standard Operational Guidelines that help define the initial operations of the department once they have arrived on scene of the incident.

## POTENTIAL WARNING SIGNS

The first responder's observation skills on any incident can provide them with critical information that can ultimately keep them out of harm's way. Clandestine Laboratories in many instances have a number of warning signs that may be present and provide clues to emergency responders early on in the incident that will assist them in making tactical decisions.

Situational awareness begins prior to the dispatch and includes knowledge of the response area, access and egress routes, terrain and weather conditions. These considerations will allow the responder to place themselves in a defensive position if they suspect that they are responding to or on-scene of a suspected Clandestine Laboratory.

Once on-scene the responder should conduct their size-up and look for anything that is out of the ordinary and pay attention to what is sometimes referred to as their sixth sense. The responder may sense that something is out of place and they should pay attention to these observations as well as communicate with other responders who may be sensing the same thing. Another source of information is neighbors and/or bystanders who may be more familiar with the situation and provide additional intelligence as to unusual occurrences in or around the incident scene. The following is a partial list of warning signs and are some examples of things that could clue the responders that they may be on-scene of a Clandestine Laboratory.

- Cameras, high fences, locked gates, heavy chains and boarded/covered windows
- Unusual security measures, obstructed views to property
- Reluctance to allow access
- Aggressive or apprehensive behavior
- Signs and/or symptoms, e.g., chemical exposure, burns or difficulty breathing
- Condensation on interior windows
- Unusual odors
- Excess air conditioning units
- Continuous sound of electrical generators or fans
- Indoor high voltage lights or excessive lighting
- Illegal utility connections
- Rarely occupied home
- Unusual vehicle traffic at odd hours
- Empty containers of chemicals, precursors; laboratory equipment

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## ON SCENE CONSIDERATIONS

- Many times a response to these incidents is unknown until arrival on scene or during an entry operation. An incident can present as safe then escalate quickly. Appropriate actions of the first arriving emergency responders are paramount.
- If a Clandestine Lab is suspected, local law enforcement should be notified immediately and an area of physical safety established for emergency personnel.
- Radio traffic should be kept to a minimum since some Clandestine Lab operations will be scanning law enforcement radio frequencies.
- If a Clandestine Lab is found during fire attack an immediate evaluation of risks should be conducted. Evaluate the necessity to change tactics from Offensive to Defensive.
- If a Clandestine Lab is found upon entry, re-evaluate tactics and risks. Do not touch anything; watch out for anti-personnel devices (APD) and other hazards. If possible, bring all occupants out with you. Fire/EMS personnel must use care when interacting with the occupants. Remember you have also come upon an illegal activity, which is also a crime scene
- Take appropriate actions if chemicals, plants or chemical glassware, processing materials and/or drug apparatus are observed.
- Gross emergency decontamination should be conducted on emergency personnel when exposed to potential chemical products.
- Consider requesting a response from a Haz Mat Team for decontamination and possible identification and notification of on scene chemicals and additional required notifications.
- Follow local emergency response guidelines or policies for activating hazardous materials response. Most Haz Mat responses dictate that hazard zones be established, all response personnel and vehicles should be positioned up wind and all people evacuated from area.

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## SAFETY MEASURES TO REMEMBER

The following items are things to consider when assigned to a Clandestine Lab incident.

- Maintain Personnel Protection
  - Time: Keep Exposure and Product Contact to Minimum
  - Distance: Stay upwind and a safe distance away
  - Shielding: Large Physical Objects (e.g., Buildings)
- **Do not** use electronic devices (radios, Cell phones, Mobile Data Terminals, etc.) within the isolation zone.
- **Do not** turn on or off any electrical power switches or light switches within the structure(s).
- **Do not** eat or drink in or around the Clandestine Lab.
- **Do not** open or remove containers with chemicals or suspected chemicals.
- **Do not** sniff any containers
- **Do** decontaminate yourself and your clothing
- **Do** call your local law enforcement/Hazardous Materials Response Team as soon as possible.

## POTENTIAL RISKS AND HAZARDS

The following are items to consider during the risk assessment process for Clandestine Lab incidents:

- Structural Damage
- Environmental - Mold, chemical use illegal storage and dumping
- Foreign Substances
- Electrical System Tampering
- Possible theft of power
- Booby Traps - (APD) Anti-personnel devices
- Persons occupying premises (Adult & Children)
- Violence
- Toxic environment
- Flammable or explosive atmosphere
- Chemical reactions

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- Unusual situations
- Fire

## EMERGENCY CONTACTS

The following contacts should be included in the development of a local emergency response plan:

- Law Enforcement: Local/State/Federal
- Hazardous Materials Response
- Health Department
- Local EMS
- Local Hospitals
- Fish and Game
- EPA
- EOD (Explosives Ordinance Disposal Team)
- Building Department/Structural Engineers
- State Warning Center/National Response Center

## ESTABLISHMENT OF UNIFIED COMMAND

Representatives from the following agencies should be considered as members of any unified command dealing with a Clandestine Lab.

- Law Enforcement (local, state, federal)
- Fire Department
- EPA
- Fish and Game