

# PUBLICATION

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## Multiple Dangers of Meth Labs in Hotels

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A quick Internet search sheds a bright light on the dangers to hotels if guest rooms are used for methamphetamine, or "meth," production. There are dangers related to contamination and its impact on other guests, as well as cleanup costs. Also, dangers exist to guests and staff from exposure to the people involved in meth production and distribution. Finally, there are reputational dangers to the hotel brand and/or the business of the particular hotel establishment.

Meth makers prefer to produce meth in hotel rooms to reduce the danger of contaminating their own properties. But the production of meth is highly volatile, and if it is occurring in hotels, producers put other guests and staff, as well as the structures themselves, at risk. An explosion during production could cause major damage to a hotel and put other innocent guests in danger of serious injury or death.

In addition, meth makers typically are using the drug while they are producing it. While on meth, an individual can go without sleep for days and experience paranoia and delusions, sometimes reacting violently due to lack of sleep, meth addiction and hallucinations. Meth makers typically produce the drug during the middle of the night, and if other guests knock on the door of a hotel neighbor because of noxious noise or odor, it could put the guest's life at risk. Meth makers almost always have weapons in their possession. These same risks are equally applicable to hotel staff. Safety focus and adequate training are key for lodging establishments to protect guests, staff and structures.

In the last ten years, there have been over 3,000 reported meth labs in hotel rooms. Yet statistics indicate that nearly 70 percent of all contaminated properties, including hotels and motels, are not reported. According to the American Hotel and Lodging Association (AH&LA), a meth lab can be set up and producing meth in less than four hours, and meth producers usually do so between midnight and 4 a.m. According to Joseph McInerney, former president and CEO of AH&LA, "meth lab cooks may check into the hotel late at night and cook their meth through the night before leaving early the next morning." Older properties tend to attract meth producers, who typically will rent a room with direct access to a parking lot, and will request a room away from the front desk office.

While setting up a meth lab in a hotel room is advantageous for meth makers, it is extremely expensive for the hotel industry, both in physical risk and liability. The cost of decontaminating a single room can range from \$2,000 to \$20,000, according to AH&LA. As with many crimes, it is the innocent victims who suffer the consequences of meth lab production in hotel rooms. Guests, as well as staff, may be exposed to dangerous chemicals. The threat of an explosion is a serious one. Based on available statistics, there is a substantial risk that guests are renting rooms that have been used as meth labs and have not been decontaminated. Guests who stay in these rooms may experience asthma-like symptoms, irritated eyes and/or skin, or extreme nausea. Traces of toxic chemicals used to produce meth can last more than a decade.

How can hotel owners and guests protect themselves? Hotel owners should implement training as part of the overall safety and security program and maintain a good working relationship with local law enforcement, who can train hotel staff on what to look for when guests check into a property. Meth can be made in coffee pots or plastic bottles, and the over-the-counter drug pseudoephedrine (now subject to buyer disclosure at the time of

purchase) is a key ingredient. Hotel cleaning staff should be watchful for these types of items in trash as well as large amounts of trash left in a room. The actual production of meth causes significant toxic odors.

If a guest room has been contaminated, the operator would be well-advised to contact a local fire and recovery clean-up business that is specifically trained in meth lab decontamination. It is critical that the decontamination be done properly by trained crisis cleaning providers and state laws usually require it. Some states also require certification that the property is safe before it can be occupied again.<sup>1</sup> Typically, a room will have to be stripped of the interior furnishings, flooring and drywall and rebuilt from the structural framing out. In addition, a hotel owner should have any staff who may have been exposed to a meth lab examined by a physician and tested for any symptoms that could result from exposure.

There is a very real reputational risk that media reports of a meth lab discovery can negatively impact a hotel's business and the hotel brand's image and public perception, which in turn may affect other independent hotel owners operating under the brand's flag, because guests will likely avoid a hotel that has had a reported meth lab incident. To minimize potential consequences, hotel owners should be proactive in staff training, reporting potential issues and cooperating with local law enforcement. Not reporting a suspected meth lab can have serious consequences for the hotel's business and viability in the long term. In addition, willful ignorance of the existence of a meth lab is no longer a defense and can potentially result in criminal liability. In Tennessee, for example, it is a felony for a person to permit another to use a structure owned or controlled by that person for meth production or with reckless disregard of the meth producer's intent. As a result, property owners cannot simply ignore the problem and refuse to report suspected meth lab activity.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Tenn. Code Ann. §68-212-502 and §68-212-505

<sup>2</sup>See Tenn. Code Ann. §39-17-433(a)(3)