

High-tech van new drug-fighting weapon

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The Stanislaus County Sheriff's Department on Monday showed off a one-of-a-kind van that can detect vapors from meth labs while parked miles away.

It's the first time a nonmilitary agency in the United States will use the chemical-detection device. Previously, chemical detection vans were limited to the military to look for chemical weapons.

"Stanislaus County has a new and powerful drug-fighting weapon," Sheriff Les Weidman said. "It will provide us with more efficiency and improve the safety of our officers who are investigating methamphetamine."

The truck was hidden behind curtains Monday so the press couldn't take pictures of its exterior. A small opening in the curtains allowed politicians and reporters to peek inside the van and see all the high-tech equipment.

"We know we won't be able to keep the look of the van a secret forever, but we do plan on changing its color and other features," Weidman said. "Our hope is the criminals can run, but they won't be able to hide from this."

For every pound of methamphetamine manufactured, about 7 pounds of waste is created, Weidman said. Most of that waste is gas fumes, but it also includes liquid and solid waste.

Because the fumes are toxic, most meth lab operators try to ventilate the area around their lab. That creates a chemical cloud around the outside area.

The van has a camera and an infrared sensor on top of it, said Larry Grim, co-founder and chairman of Mesh Inc., the engineering firm that designed the vehicle.

The detector looks for temperature changes in the atmosphere, Grim said. Those heat signatures act as a fingerprint to chemicals, he said, because each chemical will store and reflect energy in a slightly different way.

By using the infrared spectrum — invisible to the human eye — the temperature of each chemical appears as a different color. Acetone may show up as green and refrigerant might appear pink.

The detector cannot see through walls or glass, but it can detect chemicals in an open space from as far away as three miles, Grim said.

The van also has a built-in GPS device and a DVD recorder so it can record data captured by the camera and sensor while also showing the location of the van.

The van will not be used to randomly sweep neighborhoods, Detective Dustin Bruley said, but will be used when information about a possible meth lab has been received.

By using the van, detectives will be able to tell if the tip is a good one. It also will serve as a warning that protective suits and other precautions might be needed in a search, Weidman said.

Emergency crews will be able to use the van during disasters such as train crashes or fires at manufacturing plants, he said.

The van and equipment cost about \$750,000, Weidman said. The money came from state and federal grants, and it took the department years to get the van, Weidman said.

"It takes someone like Sheriff Weidman to think outside the box to get a tool like this," U.S. Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced, said. "Today, Sheriff Weidman is sending a loud message to the bad guys: 'Get out of Dodge.'"

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