

Opening Statement
Chairman Mark Souder

“Ice in the Ozarks: The Methamphetamine Epidemic
in Arkansas”

Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy,
and Human Resources
Committee on Government Reform

June 28, 2004

Good morning, and thank you all for coming. This hearing continues our Subcommittee’s work on the problem of methamphetamine abuse – a problem that is ravaging the state of Arkansas and the entire nation. I’d like to thank Congressman John Boozman for inviting us here to Bentonville, and for his leadership in confronting the meth epidemic. In 2003, Congressman Boozman testified before our Subcommittee about the meth problem in northwest Arkansas, and since then we have frequently discussed ways to help communities like this one to reduce drug abuse.

Meth is one of the most powerful and dangerous drugs available, and it is also one of the easiest to make. It can be “cooked” using common household or agricultural chemicals and simple cold medicines, following recipes easily available on the Internet. The meth here in Arkansas and in other states comes from two major sources of supply. First, most meth comes from the so-called “superlabs” in California and northern Mexico. By the end of the 1990’s these superlabs produced over 70 percent of the nation’s supply of meth. The superlabs are operated by large Mexican drug trafficking organizations that have used their established distribution and supply networks to transport meth throughout the country. According to recent news reports, these groups have introduced the form of meth called “crystal meth” or “ice” to Arkansas, which is very pure and extremely addictive.

The second major source of meth comes from small, local labs that are generally unaffiliated with major trafficking organizations. These labs have proliferated throughout the country – and Arkansas has been particularly hard hit, with one of the highest rates of per capita lab seizures in the country. The total amount of meth actually supplied by these labs is relatively small; however, the environmental damage and health hazard they create make them a serious problem for local communities, particularly the state and local law enforcement agencies charged with the duty to uncover and clean them up. In my home state of Indiana, for example, more than 20% of the labs raided by police were discovered only after they had exploded and started fires. Children are often found at meth labs, and have frequently suffered from severe health problems as a result of the hazardous chemicals used in drug manufacturing.

Our hearings during the 107th Congress were mostly held in Washington, and looked at this problem from a national perspective. This year, however, we have taken a different approach. We have instead been holding hearings in specific regions that have been hardest-hit by meth trafficking and abuse. In February, we held a hearing in northeastern Indiana, followed by a hearing in Detroit, Michigan, where large quantities of meth precursor chemicals like pseudoephedrine were being smuggled until very recently. In August, we will be holding a hearing in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii, where the use of crystal meth is growing rapidly.

Everywhere we go, we hear about many of the same issues: the environmental damage caused by the labs; the high costs and long hours required for law enforcement agencies to process lab sites; the heartbreaking stories of children exposed to drugs and chemicals and in need of emergency medical care and a safe place to go. We hear about how addictive and deadly this drug is, and how difficult it is to provide treatment and get meth users off of drugs.

The Bush Administration, and especially its Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), has pushed for strong and effective action against meth abuse. We will need to take action at every level – federal, state and local – to respond to this problem. Let me briefly mention three issues that need to be addressed:

First, what do we need to do to reduce the supply of meth? In the late 1990's, the federal government responded to the meth problem both here and elsewhere with stricter laws against the precursor chemical trade and tougher enforcement. The proliferation of smaller meth labs, however, means that we probably will have to further restrict the ability of meth cooks to get precursor chemicals – especially pseudoephedrine. Already many states have acted to restrict sales of cold medicines and other pseudoephedrine sources. A major question Congress must address is whether to enact a national standard for these sales, and if so, what form should it take?

Second, how should we deal with the environmental issues created in the wake of a meth lab seizure? We have to ensure that the toxic chemicals produced and dumped by lab operators are cleaned up, but these criminals rarely have enough money to compensate the government for those costs. If we impose the costs on unsuspecting land owners or landlords, however, we may give them a disincentive to monitor their property and report suspicious activity to the police. In California, for example, some farmers prefer to bury the remains of meth labs they find on their property, because if they report them they will be liable for the clean-up costs. We will have to carefully consider how we assign the responsibility for this difficult and expensive task.

Finally, how do we get meth addicts into treatment, and how do we keep young people from starting on meth in the first place? We can all agree that education and outreach are vital, but the hard part is figuring out what works best. What works for marijuana, ecstasy or cocaine may not work as well for meth.

This hearing will address these difficult questions and hopefully bring us closer to some answers. Again, I thank Congressman Boozman for inviting us here, and for the assistance that he and his staff provided to our Subcommittee in setting up this hearing. We next welcome three witnesses who have joined us to discuss the federal government's response to the meth problem: Mr. William J. Bryant, Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the Drug Enforcement Administration's Little Rock, Arkansas office; Mr. William M. Cromwell, Acting United States Attorney for the Western District of

Arkansas; and Mr. James MacDonald, the Federal On Scene Coordinator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Region 7.

At a hearing like this, it is vitally important for us to hear from the state and local agencies forced to fight on the "front lines" against meth and other illegal drugs. We welcome Mr. Keith Rutledge, the Governor's State Drug Director; the Honorable David Hudson, a Sebastian County Judge; Mr. J.R. Howard, Executive Director of the Arkansas State Crime Lab; Ms. Shirley Louie, Environmental Epidemiology Supervisor at the Arkansas Department of Health; Sheriff Danny Hickman of Boone County; and Mr. David Gibbons, Prosecuting Attorney for the 5th Judicial District.

We also welcome five witnesses whose work in the field of drug treatment and prevention is of vital importance here in northwestern Arkansas: the Honorable Mary Ann Gunn, Circuit Judge for the Fourth Judicial District, who has worked extensively with the Drug Courts initiative here; Mr. Larry Counts, Director of Decision Point Drug Treatment Facility; Mr. Greg Hoggatt, Director of Drug Free Rogers-Lowell; Mr. Michael Pyle, a recovering methamphetamine addict; and Dr. Merlin D. Leach, Executive Director of the Center for Children & Public Policy. Finally, we also welcome two representatives of the retail and trucking industries, whose assistance and expertise we will need to stop the problem of meth production and trafficking: Mr. Bob Dufour, Director of Professional and Government Relations for Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.; and Mr. Lane Kidd, President of the Arkansas Trucking Association. We thank everyone for taking the time to join us this morning, and look forward to your testimony.