

*Indiana failed to test, clean or condemn nearly 3,000 former meth labs. Then families moved in.*

# Cleaning House

By **Bob Segall**, WTHR-TV Indianapolis

**N**o one wants to be the bearer of bad news. But there I was, knocking on doors across Indiana to deliver a disturbing message: “You and your kids are living in a house that’s a former meth lab. It’s never been cleaned up. And according to state law, you’re not supposed to be living here.”

It’s a conversation I had with unsuspecting families over and over again as photojournalist Bill Ditton and I visited more than 400 contaminated homes during a four-month investigation that took homeowners and state officials by surprise.

Finding the toxic homes was surprisingly easy. Figuring out how local and state officials had so badly dropped the ball was far more challenging. And what WTHR found in Indiana raises questions about how other states have addressed (or not addressed) countless homes contaminated during the nation’s meth epidemic.

## The meth epidemic hits home

Methamphetamine started to explode as a street drug in the U.S. in the 1990s. While most meth hitting American streets today is shipped in from other countries, it used to be a local commodity cooked in kitchens and basements with a homemade concoction of over-the-counter pharmaceuticals and easy-to-access household chemicals.

That process leaves behind toxic residue that sticks to everything: walls, furniture, carpeting, clothing, toys and anything else inside a home. These dangerous residues can lead to a long list of serious health problems. That’s why cleanup crews are required to wear full hazmat gear when they enter a meth house, and it explains why states like Indiana started passing laws to help ensure residents do not live in toxic meth homes until they are properly cleaned.

Indiana’s law took effect in 2005. Since then, the Indiana State Police have busted more than 13,000 meth labs and listed them in an online registry. If a property appears on the registry, ISP identified it as a confirmed meth lab and the local health department is required to designate the home as uninhabitable until it’s cleaned and tested to ensure it no longer presents a health hazard.

When WTHR’s 13 Investigates team got a tip that families in southern Indiana were living in houses listed on the state’s toxic home registry, we wondered how that was possible. I met with families who explained they discovered by accident that they unknowingly purchased a former meth lab that was never cleaned. They and their young children had started experiencing health problems, such as respiratory disease, headaches, chronic fatigue and rashes — all consistent with exposure to toxic meth residue.



## Building a new database

Back in the newsroom, I created a database of every property listed on the state toxic home registry and determined where police found meth on each property. (The database showed whether the meth-making activity was in the kitchen, bathroom, garage, backyard, etc.). I narrowed the list to actual homes — not cars, boats or motorhomes, which also appear in the state database — where police found signs of an active meth lab inside. Then I sorted the properties by county and hit the road again to visit as many former meth labs as possible.

Bill and I soon discovered the state's data was deeply flawed. Contaminated homes that were a danger to the public were lumped in with parking lots and fields where there were only rudimentary signs of meth ingredients, posing little risk to public health. Some addresses turned up empty lots where a contaminated home was razed years earlier, but no one removed the property from the database. But most of the addresses we visited were actual homes or apartment buildings and,

An environmental health inspector places a large sticker on the window of a Muncie, Indiana, meth house.

WTHR

sure enough, many were inhabited.

Residents told us they moved in without receiving a warning and were surprised when we showed them the ISP meth lab report that detailed what investigators found inside. Most of these reports were accessible online and included the actual police report as an attachment. While Bill and I spent weeks visiting homes and talking with families, WTHR producers Susan Batt and Cyndee Hebert spent countless hours correcting state data and refining our own toxic homes database.

Next, we visited local health departments to ask why they had not condemned the properties until they were tested and cleaned — as required by law. Many of the health inspectors were candid, admitting they were unfamiliar with the state law. And they told me even if they had known about it, they didn't have time to enforce the law.

"I simply have too many other things to do," one of the inspectors acknowledged. During our interview, another inspector challenged state officials who oversee the statewide cleanup program to "get off their rear" and provide local

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Reporter Bob Segall and photojournalist Bill Ditton visited more than 400 contaminated homes over four months. WTHR

health departments help in enforcing the regulations. Indiana State Police expressed shock and disappointment to learn local and state health departments were allowing unsuspecting families to move into contaminated meth homes officials raided months earlier.

We eventually came to the following conclusions:

- Local and state health departments failed to test, clean or condemn nearly 3,000 contaminated homes, allowing families to live inside in violation of state law.
- Families across Indiana developed chronic health problems from years of living inside former meth labs that were not properly tested or cleaned.
- Lawmakers and state leaders who passed legislation to address the problem had no idea the solution they developed was not working due to a lack of enforcement.
- Many local health departments across the state lack the staffing, funding and education needed to properly enforce the state's toxic home

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cleanup program.

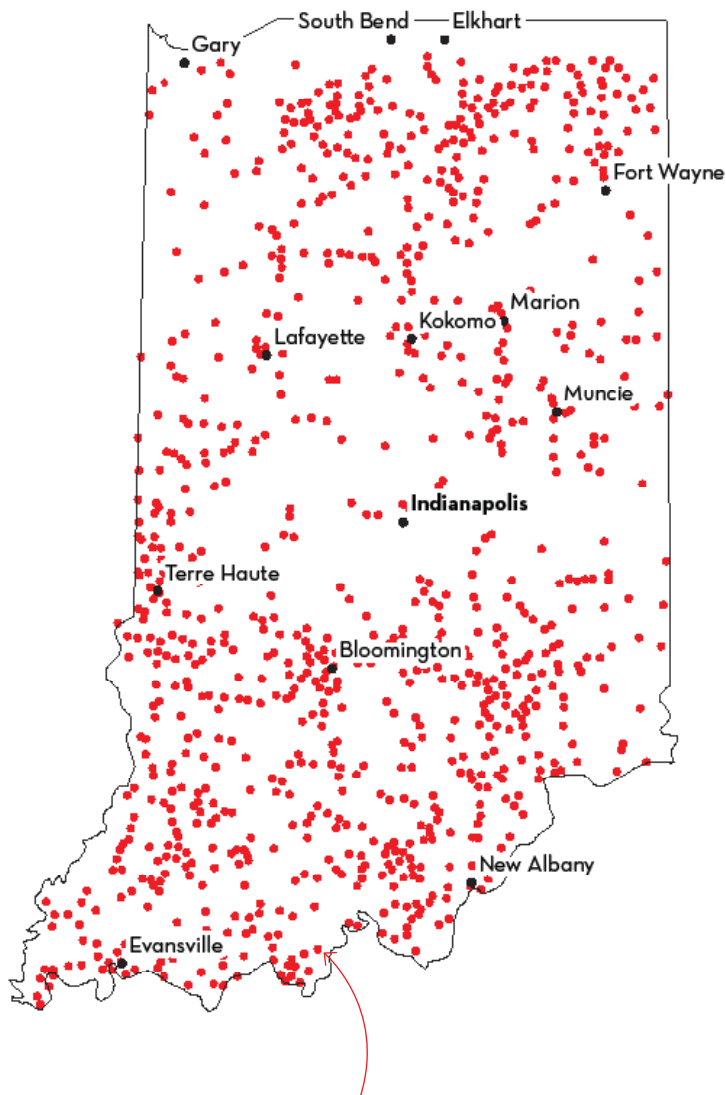
- The state's online registry of toxic homes was full of errors, providing local health departments and homeowners with incorrect information about the safety status of thousands of Indiana homes.

As part of our reporting, we transformed our refined data into a searchable online database. It allowed viewers to find uncleaned meth houses in their neighborhoods and linked to police reports showing exactly what investigators found. Unlike the state's neglected online database, WTHR's searchable data included updated and corrected information gleaned from months of investigation and analysis.

### Results and replication

What started as bad news for thousands of Indiana families yielded very positive results. After our report, health departments started notifying families they were living in former meth houses and informing them they had to have the homes test-





An analysis of state records found **nearly 3,000 Indiana meth houses** have no cleanup certificate filed with the Indiana State Department of Environmental Management.

ed (and, if necessary, cleaned) or risk being condemned. Other families moved and began to feel better soon after leaving the toxic environment.

The investigation also triggered an emergency meeting at the governor's office and prompted widespread changes. Local health departments initiated testing and/or remediation of contaminated homes and removed thousands of properties from the state's toxic home registry. The governor ordered a massive shakeup in state agencies that oversee Indiana's broken cleanup program. The state legislature also passed a law to formally reorganize the toxic home cleanup program and to give health inspectors new tools and resources to enforce the state's cleanup laws.

So, how has your state handled contaminated meth homes?

Most states that seriously tackled the methamphetamine epidemic now have an agency that oversees the enforcement and response, and a program designed to keep contaminated homes vacant until they are cleaned. Many states also maintain a list or registry of all known properties where authorities made a meth bust, as well as a list of properties that were tested and/or cleaned. (In Indiana, those were two separate lists maintained by two separate agencies.) Getting those lists will give you a starting point to investigate several important angles:

1. Are the lists accurate or does the state not maintain up-to-date information? If the information is outdated, is the enforcement outdated and neglected, too?

2. Have state or local health departments followed up to ensure contaminated properties are adequately addressed after they are identified?

3. What laws, if any, exist in your state to help ensure families are not living in properties contaminated by meth and who is responsible for enforcing those laws?

Visiting homes on the registries, speaking with homeowners and requesting remediation reports from local and state agencies will help you determine if cleanup programs are working as intended. If you find your state does not have a registry or central clearinghouse to monitor and track former meth labs, that might suggest poor oversight, which may lead to a compelling story as well. ♦