

Second alleged meth lab busted in Austin, thanks to tip from public

Written by Marty Randall

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Five people now face felony charges in Scott Circuit Court based on their presence at an alleged, illegal drug lab set up to manufacture methamphetamine.

The meth lab was the second to be discovered and dismantled in Austin within a six-day period in December.

Suspects now facing charges include Kenny Albertson, 34; Tisha Houchens, 29; Brandon Smith, 32; Jennifer Smith, 31; and Elvis Vest, 25. Albertson, Houchens and the Smiths all listed their address as 1271 West Booe Road, Austin. Vest is a resident of East Firetown Road, Salem, according to court records.

The case started when Scottsburg Patrolman Troy Ford received a tip about possible criminal activity on W. Booe Rd. Based on the information, he obtained a search warrant. On December 18, Ptl. Ford, Austin Lt. Shawn Hurt and Patrolman Robert Gudgel and Deputy Jeremy Arnold of the Sheriff's Department went to the residence along with two other Austin reserve officers, Daryl Hickman and Chris Everhart, to serve the warrant.

All of those taken into custody were at the residence, which smelled strongly of chemicals, Pt. Ford stated in his probable cause affidavit. On a kitchen table, officers recovered several baggies filled with white powder as well as digital scales, glass pipes, a glass jar coated with white residue and a mirror with white powder on it.

In a bedroom, three larger baggies were discovered, each apparently containing the same white powder.

Taking an inventory of the house, Ptl. Ford reported he found a clothes basket with what he thought to be components of a meth lab, such as salt, plastic and glass containers, coffee filters and plastic hoses. He said when he found this lot, he called the Indiana State Police post at Sellersburg to request help from its Meth Lab Team.

According to charges filed, all of the white powder apparently tested positively for meth. Each defendant was charged on December 21 with a Class A felony dealing in meth over three grams as well as possession of meth over three grams, a Class C felony, and maintaining a common nuisance, a Class D felony.

The officer noted that the residence was rented by Houchens.

Public defenders were appointed for Albertson, Vest and Jennifer Smith. Bonds on each of the five defendants was set at \$100,000 full cash or corporate surety, and each was scheduled for a jury trial on May 10 by Judge Roger Duvall.

Since Houchens and Brandon Smith indicated to the judge that they intended to hire attorneys to represent them, review hearings for those two were scheduled for January 4.

As noted, the case was the second involving an alleged meth lab in Austin. On December 12, Ptl. Ford and several Austin and Scott County officers apparently located a meth lab on Blunt Avenue. One man, Marcelino Rodriguez Sr., 52, was arrested and charged with having an illegal drug lab/possession or sale of precursors and maintaining a common nuisance, both Class D felonies.

He awaits a March 11 trial in Superior Court on those charges.