

By Tennessee Attorney General BOB COOPER

Some returning students may think that the new generation of synthetic drugs on the shelves of their local stores is perfectly safe and legal. But if they really believe that, it is a good thing they are going back to school. Recent changes in Tennessee and federal laws cover a broader range of synthetic drugs and impose increased penalties. Store owners who market these dangerous substances run the risk of seeing their store padlocked by local authorities.

Synthetic drugs burst onto the scene in Tennessee a couple of years ago under harmless-sounding names such as “bath salts” and “plant food.” The products were widely promoted as legal alternatives to ecstasy, cocaine and other controlled substances. At that time, the Office of the Attorney General and the Tennessee Department of Agriculture responded aggressively to get these products off the shelves. The General Assembly also took prompt action to outlaw the substances. The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation cooperated with local law enforcement, district attorneys and my office to crack down on retailers and wholesalers under the new statutes.

Rogue chemists, however, are constantly working to get around the law, and marketers are creative. New generations of these drugs are appearing in stores with packaging that makes them look like common energy drinks or other dietary supplements. Federal and state lawmakers are responding. Earlier this year our legislature made it more difficult to cook up legal variations of the banned drugs simply by tweaking existing formulas.

Additionally, a federal law passed by Congress and signed last month by President Obama bans several of the most common synthetic compounds and sets penalties similar to those for selling other controlled substances. As a consequence, those who put these drugs on their shelves or distribute them from their warehouses are subject to both state and federal prosecution.

Recently, Metro Nashville law enforcement, along with federal agents, used these new laws to crack down on convenience stores, tobacco shops, and other businesses allegedly selling these substances. Several stores were closed and padlocked and arrests made. This should send a strong message to store owners, managers, and their employees around the state. (Lebanon Police have in recent months cracked down as well on local markets that were reportedly selling

synthetic drugs.)

The issue with these substances is not simply that they are illegal. Unfortunately, they could be even more health-threatening than the drugs they replace. In the last year, calls to poison control centers about synthetic drugs increased several hundred percent nationwide. Emergency room professionals are seeing dangerously high temperatures, heart rates, and blood pressures combined with severe psychological symptoms. Massive quantities of sedatives often are needed to stabilize the patients.

In a worrisome trend, these products are often displayed on store shelves alongside candy and similar products available to children. Legitimate business people regularly take every precaution to avoid selling a carton of spoiled milk or piece of tainted chicken. Yet, much more dangerous products are being marketed from their shelves as supposedly “safe and legal.” Sellers are taking huge risks with their customers’ health and safety by selling these synthetic drugs. Under the new state and federal statutes, many of these synthetic drugs are now illegal, and they certainly are not safe.