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Delivering the meth message Idaho Meth Project hits Magic Valley

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We interrupt your lives, which may be slowly slipping toward meth addiction, to bring you this important message:

Watch as about a dozen billboards and newspaper ads crop up across Magic Valley this week and the next, radio spots fill the airwaves and graphic advertising saturates prime time - all decrying the plague of methamphetamine.

The Idaho Meth Project has launched. And Idahoans - especially teenagers - are its test subject.

"I was 13 the first time I put a needle in my arm," a 20-year-old woman from Boise told the IMP in an e-mail. Since Monday, about six Idahoans have already pitched their stories to be disseminated by the IMP on the project's Web site. "I was addicted from that moment on. Beware: one is too many, and 1,000 is never enough."

Voices such as hers could be heard soon. But for now, the Idaho Meth Project is using other testimonials - from the Montana Meth Project.

Real Montana young adults who've suffered trauma from meth tell their stories on average 150 times per week on KEZJ and KSNQ radio stations. On the television, KMVT, KSAW, KTFT, KXPB and on cable stations FX, MTV, Spike TV and Animal Planet, the Meth Project is airing 180 graphic dramatized slots on average per week. And 36 billboards across Idaho currently depict Montana meth abuse cases.

The Times-News runs the project's ads at less than half-price. The hard-hitting content is second-hand: The faces of addiction are Montana kids. But as the project kicks off, they could soon be replaced by young burned-out faces of Idahoans.

"During this first phase, we were in such a big ramp-up to get this going we used the ads that were running in Montana," said Megan Ronk, director of the Idaho Meth Project. "We went in and swapped out the logos, so it says Idaho Meth Project instead of Montana Meth Project. This is a campaign that has been extremely successful in Montana. There's no need to reinvent the wheel. But now that the project is live, we have a tab on our Web site that says share your story."

The tab allows Idahoans who want to share their stories to become next in line for producing the localized content that drastically reduced meth use and meth culture in Montana, Ronk said.

As of Friday, the project has fundraised \$1.6 million in private contributions. It still needs another \$1 million to run the media-saturation program for a full year. It's soliciting that money both from private donors and the Millennium Fund - \$4 million made available annually to the state from the tobacco industry.

There's one man at Lamar Outdoor Advertising who is responsible for all the company's Magic Valley billboards. He's swamped, to put it mildly. Of the 11 billboards, which were expected to be posted by Friday, most have been stalled by snowy weather.

"Sometimes mother nature doesn't cooperate," said Todd Jones, Lamar's Magic Valley district manager, who's spent 17 years in local billboard advertising. "It's definitely the biggest statewide buy I've seen."

Ronk claimed there are already signs that the project's message is working, but there's also been some misinterpretation about the project's strategy.

She said she received a call from a parent who said he was driving his kid back from basketball practice when a slot came on the radio. The parent was shocked: his kid, who was usually averse to having the "drug talk", wanted to talk about the drug.

The advertisements, "They sort of almost leave you a little breathless, speechless," Ronk said. "They are, I think, very shocking to a lot of people and we are already amazed at the discussion it's sparking."

Other adults have complained they're not seeing evidence of the meth project taking hold.

Ronk said, these people are tuning in to the wrong channels.

"It's important to remember we're not on talk radio," Ronk said. "We are where the kids are watching and where the young adults are watching."

The staging is happening now, but the social scientific experiment hit the ground months ago in fall.

The project discovered through a survey what thousands of randomly selected teenagers, parents and young adults thought about meth and what sort of contact they'd had with the drug. Data gleaned through that survey will likely be made available to the public this month, Ronk said. Next fall, expect a second evaluation conducted the same way.

Work place drug testing, data from law enforcement are among the other ways the project will measure progress.

"We have already received a number of e-mails from Idahoans that have shared their personal story," Ronk said. "Our plan is to now capture those, and to start working with those folks to see if we can produce some of our own radio ads. And you would know where they were from."