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First lady, Attorney General discuss Meth Project

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By Erika Bolstad

WASHINGTON - It took three years, but by the end of an advertising blitz, most Montana teenagers believed that trying methamphetamines just once causes brain damage.

On Tuesday, Idaho first lady Lori Otter and Attorney General Lawrence Wasden were in Washington to talk about how Idaho began its own Meth Project, a preventative ad campaign founded by Montana philanthropist Tom Siebel.

"It's so powerfully addictive, it changes moms into monsters, and it changes your child into something you don't recognize," said Wasden, who is president of the National Association of Attorneys General and was in town for the organization's spring meeting.

The Meth Project, an ad campaign that uses brutally honest imagery to frighten people away from trying the drug, is credited with turning meth use in Montana from a rampant crime and addiction problem to a manageable one.

In Idaho, the state and private businesses have come together to provide the money for the project. Half of the $1.5 million raised so far comes from the state's tobacco settlement fund and the other half from the private sector. Indian tribes, hospitals and business owners have contributed to the campaign, said Otter, who has led the effort to raise money for the program. Like Montana's campaign, Idaho's will target teens.

"Everywhere kids are, we are," Otter said.

The Montana campaign has been effective by treating meth prevention as just another product to sell to 12- to 17-year-olds. And it targets teens in two powerful areas: their social standing and their appearance.

One print campaign features a photo of the lower half of a young woman's face, her teeth rotten and her lips covered with sores. The caption reads, "You'll never worry about lipstick on your teeth again."

The Meth Project, with its theme "Not even once," is credited with reducing methamphetamine use in Montana by 70 percent. It was accomplished in part by saturating the state with advertising - on radio, television, newspapers and billboards. For the past three years, the Meth Project was the state's biggest advertiser, Siebel said.

When it comes to meth, the product and its effects are so repugnant that it practically sells itself, Siebel said.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the most effective prevention effort in history," he told people attending a reception in Washington. "It's a pretty easy product to work with. You're dealing with a pure, unadulterated evil."