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Idaho updating Meth project imported from Montana

By Sean Breslin/Staff writer

It's been nearly three years since images of strung-out teens flooded Montana primetime TV as part of the statewide Montana Meth Project aimed at warning kids of the dangers of methamphetamine.

Idaho imported the project, using the same ads that ran in Montana, and kicked off its campaign in January after a year of soliciting funds. Now, The Idaho Meth Project is looking to update its ad campaign this fall with stories from local recovering meth addicts, said Megan Ronk, director of the Idaho project.

"The Montana Meth Project has had an effect on teen and adult meth use," Ronk said.

The numbers, however, aren't so clear. The Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey reported a 3.7 percent drop in meth use among high school students between 2005 and 2007, but the Montana Meth Project's own "Uses & Attitudes Survey 2008" reported that "Usage appears to be neither higher nor lower than in past surveys. Three percent of teens admit to having tried meth, a number that has remained essentially stable since 2005."

Montana Meth Project director Peg Shea credited the discrepancy to how the Youth Risk Behavior Survey focused on only high school students, while the Uses & Attitudes survey questioned people ages 12 to 17.

When Montana launched its graphic advertising campaign in 2005, meth use had been declining since tracking use of the drug began in 1999. That year, 13.5 percent of high school students reported using meth during their lives, according to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. By 2005, that number had dropped to 8.3 percent. From 2005 to 2007, the two years the survey overlaps with the Montana Meth Project, that number had dropped to 4.6 percent.

Montana Attorney General Mike McGrath, who also sits on the Montana Meth Project's Board of Directors, said meth use had been dropping, but more needed to be done.

"The larger trend only went so far," McGrath said.

But for Montana's seventh- and eighth-graders, use of meth increased during the two years the Montana Meth Project was blanketing the state with ads. Those students reported an increase in lifetime meth use, from 2.8 percent to 3.0 percent.

That's not a big increase, but it's a problem, McGrath said. "We need to keep working on them."

Shea, director of the Montana project, said she's not concerned about such a small increase, which falls within the survey's margin of error. She said the project is eyeing the future.

"What's going to be really important is the 2009 numbers," she said.

According to Idaho's Youth Risk Behavior Survey results, meth use in Idaho has been more or less constant since the survey began asking Idaho teens about meth in 2001. That year, 7.2 percent of respondents said they'd tried the drug once or more. It dropped to 5.6 percent in 2003, and dropped again in 2005 to 5.5 percent.

But the 2007 survey showed an increase up to 6.4 percent of teens. All the numbers are within the survey's margin of error.

McGrath said the ad campaign is only one piece of Montana's statewide effort to confront the meth problem. In 2005, the state legislature passed a bill restricting the purchase of cold medicines containing pseudoephedrine, a key ingredient in meth. It's had a significant effect on home-grown meth, McGrath said.

"We've dried up the meth labs," McGrath said.

But even before the legislation passed, most meth in the state came from super-labs in Mexico, just as it does now, McGrath said. Since drying up the supply isn't an option for state officials, they've focused on tackling local demand. And while the numbers regarding use in Montana might be conflicting, attitudes in that state are changing due to the media onslaught, said McGrath.

"It's certainly had a significant impact," he said. "Prior to that, we were basically a state in denial."

But the graphic ads are just part of the campaign.

Community involvement and meeting with people are key to changing attitudes about meth, said Debbie Field, director of the Idaho Office of Drug Policy.

"I don't sit in my office really often," Field said. "I would be so stupid if I said having these ads was the only way to make this work."

Field said since she became director in January 2007, she's talked with recovering addicts, community organizers and teens about the drug. And she knows she's got her work cut out for her.

"When you have to convince a generation what (meth) does, you can't go away for at least 10 years," she said.

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