

“Anti-meth group enlists art”

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Graphic billboards, such as this one last May on Seltice Way in Coeur d'Alene, are part of the Idaho Meth Project's campaign to prevent first-time methamphetamine use.

Everyone has seen the billboards. One look and eyes quickly turn back to the road. They portray people whose appearances have deteriorated to the point of rotting teeth and discolored skin.

That is exactly what the Idaho Meth Project has hoped to accomplish since launching its campaign two years ago. A nonprofit organization, the Idaho Meth Project is a prevention program whose goal is to prevent first-time meth use.

Sarah Ingram of the National Meth Project, based in Los Angeles, said that the program is now in eight states, with Idaho being the third state to implement it two years ago. Other states include Montana, Arizona, Colorado, Wyoming, Hawaii, Georgia and the southern portion of Illinois.

Founded by California resident Thomas Siebel, the project came about as a result of Siebel's exposure to the meth problem while spending a portion of each year in Montana.

“Montana was fifth in the nation per capita in meth use,” said Ingram, who adds that Siebel came up with the idea of creating a public education campaign based on the premise of consumer marketing.

“Instead of selling a product he wanted to unsell a product,” said Ingram. The goal was to target kids who are at risk of trying any type of controlled substance and educating them about the dangers of methamphetamine use before they ever have a chance to experiment with the dangerous drug.

According to Ingram and information released by her office on Monday, the results have been significant.

“We have had great results in Montana. Since the time the project started, teen meth use (in Montana) is down 62 percent,” she said. The results are from a survey put out by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and administered in all 50 states. Since introducing the Idaho Meth Project, statistics show that meth use among teens in Idaho has decreased 52 percent in just two years.

According to statistics provided by the Idaho Meth Project, the state spends \$66 million dollars annually to incarcerate users of methamphetamine.

To help further their cause of preventing the use of meth, the Idaho Meth Project on Monday launched a new campaign aimed at sending an anti-meth message through each of Idaho's 44 counties. The Paint the State contest will involve 13- to 18-year-olds who will produce artwork – of any style and any medium – with a clear anti-meth message. The contest was first done in Montana in 2006.

“In Montana they (the contest participants) painted everything from barns to walls to cows,” said Ingram, who added that Montana's contest generated more than 660 images.

As part of its goal to spread the message, the contest guidelines state that the artwork must be visible from public places – whether it is a highway, a field or city streets. With permission from the owner – and in some cases the city in which the artwork is displayed – the artwork can be on display for an undetermined amount of time. However, the contest guidelines require that it must be on display during the week of July 12-18 in order to be eligible for prize money.

Funded primarily through private donations, the Idaho Meth Project is awarding a total of \$3,000 in prizes for each county. The first-place winner in each county will receive \$1,500 with second and third receiving \$1,000 and \$500, respectively. First-place winners from each county will compete for the state prize of \$5,000. Idaho artist Charles Gill and a statewide panel will judge the competition.

Paint the State program coordinator Elli Brown has traversed the state. Some of the suggestions she brings to organizers include having a local artist assist teens with their vision and encouraging those who may not be able to afford supplies to contact local businesses to help sponsor their project.

Ingram said that Paint the State is a wonderful way for kids to learn more about the dangers of meth use.

“It's a great way to get the message to the community at a grass roots level,” she said. “And teens talking to other teens is a powerful way to communicate.”