



Montana Meth Project works, deserves our support

By PEGGY BELTRONE
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As Cascade County Commissioner, I have been witness to the debilitating impact methamphetamine use has on our community. And while the Great Falls area has seen a decrease in Meth-related crime since 2005, I can attest that meth is still a very real and costly threat to the well-being of our children and our neighborhoods.

Nationwide methamphetamine use costs our country a hefty \$23.4 billion each year, according to a recent study by the RAND Corporation.

The study also found that the law enforcement and criminal justice systems are burdened with more than 15 percent of this cost, spending in excess of \$4 billion nationally on processing meth-specific offenses and meth-induced violent crimes.

From my experience on the U.S. Advisory Committee for Juvenile Delinquency Prevention, I know that the buck doesn't stop there; once offenders are charged, the justice system continues to pay the price to incarcerate and treat these addicts.

Applying a similar research method in Montana, a study conducted by our Attorney General's office found that the cost of methamphetamine in our state has declined since the Meth Project launched in 2005, when it peaked at \$300 million. As of 2008, we had reduced that cost to \$200 million, but this is still a hefty price to pay for an illicit drug. These exorbitant costs can be prevented, or at the very least, we can attack the costs at the source of the problem. I know that once a meth user develops an addiction, it's costly to treat that person and even harder to break the cycle of addiction. The ripple effect of meth addiction is felt throughout our community — children suffer, jails are overcrowded and families' ties are forever broken.

Fortunately for Montana, we have made great strides in reducing methamphetamine abuse by supporting our law enforcement officers and implementing an effective prevention program with the Montana Meth Project. The Project's success in particular sends a clear message to other states dealing with costly meth problems that there are prevention campaigns that really work. The hard-hitting advertising campaign and widespread community action programs aimed at reducing meth use began in 2005; since that time, Meth-related crimes are down 62 percent, while teen use has declined by 45 percent and use among adults has decreased by 72 percent.

The Montana Meth Project calls to action two important "P's" of prevention: parents and policymakers. The sudden onslaught of meth use in the early part of this decade caught these two groups by surprise. The media saturation of the "Not Even Once" campaign helped mobilize action so that laws could be strengthened to fight the meth problem. The ads continue to remind parents and policy makers to stay vigilant.

There's no better proof of the campaign's success than feedback from our community. The Montana Meth Project recently surveyed teens, young adults and parents to assess whether Montanans are more aware of the dangers of meth. The survey overwhelmingly found that the project remains as successful today as it did three years ago. In fact, 83 percent of Montana teens believe there is risk in taking meth just once or twice. Teens are realizing the dangers of using meth and taking actions into their own hands.

In an inspiring display of commitment and leadership, 2,300 of our teens took part in the March Against Meth on Feb. 16 in Helena and delivered a petition signed by more than 55,000 Montana residents requesting financial support for the Montana Meth Project from the state legislature. Teens from all over the state raised their voices at the largest teen demonstration in Montana's history to help ensure that the Project continues until the Meth problem has been eradicated.

By continuing to reach out to the next generation and educating our youth about the devastating consequences of drug use, the Montana Meth Project can dramatically reduce the economic costs that stress our community.

As a mother of four, my children have benefited greatly from the Meth Project's efforts. The high costs of meth prove that we must all come together to provide full and unwavering support to prevention programs like the meth project. We can't afford to ignore this costly problem.

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Peggy Beltrone is a Cascade County Commissioner