

Missoulian

Report: Meth use declining

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By: Jennifer McKee

HELENA - Methamphetamine use in Montana appears to be declining, a new report shows, although the social costs of the addictive drug remain very high, costing the state about \$10 million a year.

"We have a long way to go," said Attorney General Mike McGrath, who unveiled the report Wednesday. "This doesn't mean we've necessarily turned the corner, but we're certainly going around the bend."

Methamphetamine is a highly addictive drug "cooked" from some cold medicines and a laundry list of other ingredients. Compared to other drugs, meth is relatively new, but quickly gained foothold in Montana in the past 15 years. The destructive drug now plays a major role in Montana crime and has pumped up costs of the state's social welfare and correctional systems.

In recent years, however, both lawmakers and private people have tried to get a handle on the drug. Beginning in 2005, the privately funded Montana Meth Project began airing graphic television, radio and billboard ads driving home the unglamorous realities of meth use.

Software entrepreneur Tom Siebel bankrolled the project to the tune of many millions of dollars. Late last year, Siebel announced a \$5 million matching grant to the program which will match donations made by other businesses.

In 2005, lawmakers passed a package of new laws aimed at better treating meth-addicted criminals and going after some of the raw ingredients of meth.

All those efforts seem to be paying off, McGrath said.

Ninety-three percent of Montana middle and high school students now say using meth is a "grave risk," according to the report.

McGrath attributes that figure directly to the Montana Meth Project.

"There are things in the media that would give kids the impression that maybe cocaine has some glamour," McGrath said, or marijuana and alcohol. But there is nothing suggesting meth is glamorous and the Meth Project ads drive home how unpleasant a meth addict's life can quickly become.

Meth use and meth-related crimes also appear to be on the decline. Workplace drug testing shows a 73 percent drop in the number of people testing positive for meth, the report shows, and the biggest state decline in the nation. Teenagers also report a drop in their own meth use, down from 13.5 percent of all teens using meth to 8.3 percent today.

Drug tests on criminals charged with drug possession also show a drop in those testing positive for meth. In 2005, 56 percent of all such criminals tested positive for meth. In 2006, that figure dropped to 25 percent.

Additionally, meth-related crimes dropped by 53 percent in 2006 after increasing for years.

The number of drug labs is also declining, the report shows. In 2006, 15 meth labs were found in

Montana. Since October, not one has been found.

McGrath attributes that to the difficulty of buying meth's main ingredient, cold medicines containing pseudoephedrine.

But he said meth has not disappeared; it's likely just coming into the state from someplace else.

While it is difficult to catch a drug trafficker, McGrath said, it's still positive that Montana has fewer meth labs, which are environmental and fire hazards and are unsafe for children.

McGrath said he expects the numbers of teens who use meth will continue to fall as younger kids exposed to the Montana Meth Project ads at an earlier age become older and are more likely to be offered the drug.

The report was preliminary, McGrath said, adding that a final report will probably take another year of work. But the early results are very promising.

"It does indicate an early trend," he said.