

GREAT FALLS TRIBUNE

Montana Meth Project unveils 3rd hard-hitting anti-drug campaign

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By Chelsi Moy

HELENA — Montanans better get ready for a whole new dose of reality.

Images of a bloody mother beaten by her meth-addicted son will soon pop up on billboards across the state and commercials showing a teenage girl selling her body in exchange for meth will interrupt TV sitcoms.

The Montana Meth Project unveiled its third statewide media campaign Tuesday at the Capitol, with nine new radio ads, four TV commercials, three print ads and billboards depicting the gruesome effects of methamphetamine — this time focusing on users' family and friends.

Project officials said the campaign will reach 80 percent of all Montana teens three times a week. Officials also released results of a statewide survey showing that Montana teens are responding favorably to the anti-meth campaign "Not even once."

All this, however, costs a pretty penny — a reality lawmakers are still grappling with.

Software billionaire Thomas Siebel, who founded the Montana Meth Project, has indicated he won't foot the bill forever. Sustainability of the project's \$5.3 million annual budget depends on funding from the state and federal government along with private donors. Attempts to secure state money for the program so far this legislative session have been less than a slam dunk.

The \$1 million Gov. Brian Schweitzer included in his budget for meth prevention was stripped out by Republicans when they sliced the state budget into six separate bills.

Sen. Roger Koopman, R-Bozeman, is carrying a bill to give \$4 million during the next two years to fund the Montana Meth Project, but that is stuck in the House Appropriations Committee, which is hashing out the new proposed state budget. Koopman said he is going to be vigilant about getting his bill onto the House floor, but that that may be difficult considering members of the Montana Meth Project didn't show up to testify in support of it.

"We support any and all efforts to keep the program going," said Executive Director Peg Shea, who was in New York at the time of the hearing, but said otherwise, she would have attended.

Shea still expects to secure state money for the project and thinks the Montana Meth Project was one of many state treatment programs and prevention groups "caught up in the mess" waged between Democrats and Republicans over the state budget.

"(Siebel's) put his money on the table," she said. "Either the official state of Montana or the citizens of Montana need to stand up and own this. We need that financial commitment."

Siebel has promised to match dollar for dollar any contributions made by private donors, Shea said.

This is the third media campaign released in three years. Commercials this time around were directed by Darren Aronofsky, who also directed the movie "Requiem for a Dream."

Meth Project officials suspect the media campaign will continue for a "long time."

Just how long?

Until teens say it's no longer effective, Shea said. Mike Gullledge, chairman of the project, said he suspects the program may even go on indefinitely — depending on funding, of course — because the goal is to wipe out all first-time meth use.

"This is not a quick-fix problem," said Attorney General Mike McGrath. "When you are talking about 12- and 14-year-olds, their world changes drastically every week. Kids need to be constantly reminded."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.