



Helena Independent Record Slaughter takes lead for Meth Project

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When Bill Slaughter was in charge of Montana's state prison between 2001 and 2006, he got a first-hand look at the impact methamphetamine has on people.

"I feared we were going to lose an entire generation of kids," Slaughter recalled on Wednesday while visiting his alma mater, Helena High School. "We had a real crisis on our hands. Law enforcement and communities were taken by surprise.

"At the Montana Women's Prison, of the 275 women there, 95 percent had some kind of meth issue. The charge might have been theft, but the theft was done to perpetuate the habit."

So it was only natural that when the opportunity arose to become the new executive director of the Montana Meth Project, Slaughter jumped at the chance. He takes over from Peg Shea, the project's original director who stepped down in January 2008, but came back for a short period after Dennis Taylor, a former Helena and Billings city manager, resigned from the top spot. Taylor said the job wasn't a good fit for him.

Slaughter said the difference in the backgrounds between himself and Shea — she was a social worker and addiction counselor — should serve the Meth Project well.

"She understood the treatment and biological issues of how meth affects your brain," Slaughter said. "I come from the public safety side of the house, have worked the streets and seen the devastation that meth use has on families, children and on prisons. My budget went through the roof because of meth when I was with Corrections."

Still, he doesn't plan on making many changes to the project, which was started in 2005 by computer magnate and Montana rancher Tom Siebel. The prevention program uses graphic ads in newspapers, on the radio, television and billboards, warning of the horrors of meth use.

Brochures from the project note that in 2005, Montana was ranked No. 5 in the nation for meth use; that use has declined by 45 percent since then.

"The model is set because it works, and we'll go forward with high-frequency, in-your-face reality advertising campaigns because that's what works," he said.

Two Helena High students who visited with Slaughter at the school said the ads got their friends talking when they first came out.

"I think the ads are pretty effective. They really show what it actually does to you," said Will Nordahl, a Helena High sophomore. "It kind of scares you away from it."

J.T. Street, a junior, added that he doesn't see many classmates that he suspects do meth, but he can pick out the people who take the drug at the bar where the 18-year-old checks IDs to prevent underage drinking.

“You see people coming in with black teeth and can tell they’ve done meth,” he said. “I just don’t understand why they do it.”

Slaughter said that attitude is more common among the teens who have been targeted in the anti-meth ads during the past four years. But since their younger siblings have yet to be confronted by the temptation to do meth — initially touted for its cheapness, and as a weight-loss, feel-good drug — that they feel the need to be ever vigilant.

“I hope I work myself out of a job,” Slaughter said, laughing. “We’ve seen a significant drop in use, but it’s important for Montanans to understand we haven’t solved the problem.”

Slaughter said they were disappointed that the governor cut \$500,000 from the \$1 million approved by the Legislature during the last session, but added that the project has always been a private/public partnership, and they’ll just have to work harder to raise funds. Siebel no longer contributes to the project.

This year’s budget is about \$2 million, and includes a \$1 million federal grant along with the state funding.

“Given the economy, it will be a struggle to raise money, but we’ll keep moving forward,” Slaughter said. “We want to keep this fresh and engage a lot of kids because it’s important for them.”