

Meth Project proves effective

Your Turn | By William Mercer, Montana U.S. Attorney | Sunday, December 13, 2009

As I conclude more than eight years as U.S. attorney, I want to reflect on Montana's successful attack against methamphetamine. It's also top of mind because, as has recently been reported, Barron's magazine cited the Montana Meth Project among the five most effective foundations in the world. In crafting the Montana Meth Project, the Siebel Foundation applied private-sector principles to the structure and execution of a prevention campaign. In this respect, the lessons of the Meth Project are instructive beyond the fight against methamphetamine.

For roughly four decades, we have spent substantial state and federal funds on drug enforcement, education and treatment. Investigators and prosecutors target those involved in selling drugs to reduce the supply. Enforcement is essential to disrupt distribution networks by making the cost of doing business (i.e., getting locked up in federal prison) too great. Enforcement also makes drugs less affordable by driving up the cost by reducing supply.

However, even vigorous and well-publicized enforcement operations cannot adequately suppress existing demand because of the grip of addiction. Due to meth's highly addictive nature, demand for treatment outpaces our capacity to provide it.

To reduce drug use, government also allocates funds for prevention through schools and marketing campaigns. Not all education efforts are equally effective. What works is on display with the Montana Meth Project: strategic planning based upon data, implementation based upon lessons learned in the strategic planning and empirical evaluation.

Research, focus groups

The Meth Project conducted research and focus groups to guide content of the ads and message delivery. Rather than use public service announcements, the Meth Project paid for spots in prime time. After each wave of ads, they resurveyed Montanans to assess whether the campaign was changing behavior and knowledge.

About those ads. The chief complaint seemed to be that they were too edgy. Perhaps they were. But the Meth Project crew knew their target audience from the survey data.

Did the ads work? By 2009, teen meth use, meth-positive workplace drug tests and meth-related crime all had dropped by significant levels. And Montana's teens became stakeholders through the anti-meth Paint-the-State mural competition and the March Against Meth in Helena.

Other jurisdictions have not been as fortunate. According to the Centers for Disease Control, in 2003, 9.3 percent of Montana teens reported using meth on at least one occasion; South Dakota reported a smaller number (7.4 percent) for the same period. In 2007, two years after the launch of the Meth Project, only 4.6 percent of Montana's teens reported using meth on one or more occasions whereas South Dakota had a higher percentage (5.0 percent). In February 2009, only 3.1 percent of Montana high school students reported ever using methamphetamine and only 1 percent of Montana high school sophomores disclosed past meth use.

The demand for meth skyrocketed in the first half of the decade. In fiscal years 2001 through 2004, an annual average of 105 federal defendants were sentenced for methamphetamine distribution cases brought by my office. Until recently, distribution networks tied to Mexican suppliers continued to penetrate the Montana market at high rates. In 2005, 121 defendants were sentenced for drug offenses, 90 involving methamphetamine distribution. In 2008, 83 of 112 drug defendants were penalized for meth distribution. However, as 2009 draws to a close, only 46 federal defendants have been sentenced for methamphetamine offenses.

Drop in demand

Today, the supply of meth is well below pre-Meth Project levels, in large part because demand is way down. The number of teens disclosing use has dropped by two-thirds in the second half of the decade. What changed in this period? The Meth Project made meth use socially unacceptable; now Montanans share awareness of its ills.

The Meth Project works because of the strategic manner in which it was shaped and the frequent testing of its efforts.

Furthermore, Montanans cannot afford to declare victory. Even after big gains against meth, my colleagues in local law enforcement continue to view the drug as a very serious problem. The National Drug Intelligence Center at the Department of Justice reported in March that 10 of 14 law enforcement officials in Montana identified meth as our greatest drug threat and 14 of 14 named meth the drug that contributes most to violent crime.

Most important, today's 7-year-old will not be affected by ads from 2009 when she is in high school. Like it or not, this messaging will need to be reiterated periodically if we hope to protect today's grade-schoolers from the perils of meth in the next decade.

William Mercer is the current U.S. attorney for Montana.