

# LEE ENTERPRISES

## Survey: Montana meth use plummets Big declines seen among high school students and adults

September 19, 2007

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*George Lane IR staff photographer – Peg Shea, executive director of the Montana Meth Project, talks about the findings from the Office of Public Instruction's 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Study and Montana Meth Project's state and national survey. In the background are, left to right, Montana Attorney General Mike McGrath, Mike Gullede, Chairman of the Montana Meth Project, and Superintendent of Public Instruction Linda McCulloch.*

Methamphetamine use among Montana high school students plunged 66 percent in the past eight years, a new state survey shows, and many leaders attribute the drop to a gritty anti-meth advertising campaign.

Some 4.6 percent of high school students reported using meth at least once in a state survey conducted in late February, down from more than 13 percent in a similar survey conducted in 1999.

"This is such exciting news," Linda McCulloch, superintendent of public schools, said at a news conference Tuesday in Helena to announce the findings.

Meth use also dropped by as much as 70 percent among Montana adults in the past two years, said Montana Meth Project founder Thomas Siebel at a Washington, D.C., news conference with Montana's congressional delegation. The Montana Meth Project is the two-year-old campaign that features graphic television, radio and billboard ads showing the effects of meth use, including rotten teeth, wasted and pock-marked bodies and losing one's virginity in a dirty bathroom.

Siebel, a computer software mogul and philanthropist who owns a ranch north of Helena, said adult meth use rose by 6 percent in Wyoming and 8 percent in South Dakota during the same time covered by the Montana survey.

Montana dropped from fifth in the nation in per-capita meth use in 2005 to 39th today, he said. Meth-related crime in Montana dropped 53 percent in the past two years.

The results have been "more significant than any prevention effort in history," Siebel said.

The state results are from a survey of Montana high school students every two years, conducted by the state Office of Public Instruction.

Meth is a stimulant made from certain cold medicines, an array of common and sometimes dangerous chemicals like camp stove fuel and brake cleaner. The drug gained a foothold in Montana in the early 1990s.

About 50 percent of the people in Montana's correctional system are there for meth-related crimes, statistics show, and more than half of the children in Montana's foster care system were removed from their homes because their parents used meth and abused or neglected them.

Attorney General Mike McGrath, who also spoke at the Helena news conference, said it's significant that the rate of meth use has fallen below 10 percent, a drop he attributes to the Meth Project and its ads.

Typically, drug- and alcohol-prevention programs run by school boards, government and adults lose their effect among the bottom 10 percent of dedicated drug-using teens.

"What we're doing now is drilling into that hard-core group of at-risk kids," he said.

Since the ads began airing, teenage meth use has dropped 45 percent, McCulloch said.

Siebel also announced the results of a national survey that compared attitudes about meth among Montana teens with those of the rest of the nation. The survey, which was paid for by the Montana Meth Project and ran from March to June this year, interviewed 2,600 teenagers in 43 randomly selected schools across the country.

The survey found that while Montana teens were about as likely as their national counterparts to say meth is somewhat or very easy to get, Montana teens believe the drug is more dangerous. Montana teens were also more likely to believe that their friends would give them a hard time for using meth.

"Most importantly, what's going on in Montana is the drug use is being stigmatized," he said.

Initially, Siebel paid the tab for the Meth Project. However, the group is trying to create a budget without the sole support of its benefactor, said Peg Shea, executive director of the group.

Siebel is matching every private donation to the group up to \$5 million. The group is hoping to receive \$500,000 in federal money, which has been set aside in the upcoming, although not final, federal budget.

Siebel said the Montana Meth Project will continue through 2008 and 2009 at the same pace it has been going, with a new ad campaign out in the spring.

"It's hard to believe that we'll see the results can be as significant next year as they were last year," he said. "We're really making progress."

Arizona, Idaho and Illinois will be replicating the Montana program, he said.

Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., and Rep. Denny Rehberg, R-Mont., joined Siebel at the Washington press conference with Julie Gerberding of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"We're going to stamp out meth in Montana. We're going to do it," Baucus said.

Siebel also testified at a Senate Finance Committee hearing on meth called by Baucus, the committee's chairman. Siebel said \$40 million in federal funding would allow 10 more states to have their own meth programs.