

Meth campaign wise investment

By [Roberta Stauffer](#)
02/05/2009

Helena will be invaded Feb. 16, but not to worry. The troops will all be under 18, armed only with signatures and heartfelt support for continuing the in-your-face public education campaign against meth use.

Roughly 150 high school and middle school students from Butte and Anaconda will be among the 1,700 being bused to Helena for the March Against Meth on the President's Day holiday. Registration has closed for the bus convoys, but Montana Meth Project Executive Director Peg Shea said more kids and parents are welcome to join the rally on the Capitol steps around noon that day.

"Nobody over 23 will be speaking at this event," Shea said. It will be all about kids speaking their minds on why this campaign is effective and why the Legislature should increase funding to help it continue. A young recovering meth addict will share her painful story and speak of how her life might have been radically different had she been warned "not even once" back when she was 15. A Crow Nation drumming group has written a song for the march. A dance group from Fort Peck will perform.

Right now, the program is part of the governor's budget under the attorney general's office. He has allocated \$500,000 for the next two years, and project supporters will be asking legislators to increase that allocation to \$2 million for the next biennium.

When you consider the staggering public costs of meth addiction in Montana alone — roughly \$12 million a year to care for children in foster care due to meth, \$43 million annually to house men and women incarcerated for meth-related crimes, \$10 million a year for meth treatment programs — this prevention program starts to look like a bargain. A study released earlier this week puts the national price tag of methamphetamine use at \$23.4 billion — a mind-boggling figure.

Because of its damaging effect on the brain, meth really can hook a person with just one use, according to local project organizers who met with The Standard's editorial board this week. Butte's Brenda Lane spoke of how her son was totally consumed by the drug — didn't eat or sleep for weeks, turned completely against her and ended up in a Kansas prison.

Kelly Dawson, who works for Anaconda's Donna's House, an after-school program, said that even the highly disturbing ads are "sugar-coated." "It's ten-fold worse than any other drug," Dawson said.

And because addicts can "cook" it for themselves using highly toxic off-the-shelf ingredients such as drain cleaner, meth's a particularly tough drug to control on the supply side. Attempting to shut down demand is a sensible approach.

Robert Siler, a Butte High sophomore helping with the march, said he believes the "not even once" message has really hit home with his peers, and statistics gathered by the program back him up, showing that teen meth use has dropped by 45 percent since the campaign started in 2005.

But Siler's worried about younger kids who may someday be tempted if they're not exposed to the ugly realities of meth through ongoing campaigns like this.

We are too. This campaign is about kids and keeping them away from this scourge. Shea said the campaign is planning to expand their reach further to more Internet sites popular with their target audience.

Also significant is that it's a public/private partnership, not solely relying on government funds. Shea said state support will help increase the project's chances of securing more federal grants, and she noted that all costs for the march day are being under-written by private sponsors — First Interstate Bank, Martel Construction, Rio Tinto Energy and the Montana State Fund.

Organizers are still gathering signatures to present to legislative leaders on Feb. 16. So far "tens of thousands" have signed, Shea said, but they want to include as many Montanans as possible. Anyone 12 or older may sign the Declaration of Support, and it's available online at www.montanameth.org.