

Beyond Standard Practice: Social Work and the Media

Contributed by Caitlin Moe, BSW

As a young social worker, I entered the field knowing I wanted to help people for a living, but not knowing in what capacity I wanted to do it. I also have an interest in addiction. I was pretty sure I wanted to work in a substance abuse related profession, and after graduating with a BSW, I did just that. I was hired right out of school and spent a year working at a residential treatment center for chemically dependent teens. The work was tough and intensive—each resident had his or her own issues and usually was not there voluntarily. I remember working one-on-one with clients and putting a lot of time and effort into each. I felt as if I passed along a lot of knowledge and tools and, in return, learned how to be a better social worker. {mosgoogle right}

The relationships were rewarding for me in many ways and hopefully for my clients, as well. However, the work was challenging, and I could barely afford to pay rent and bills on my salary. Although the work was without a doubt rewarding, I could not help but think on a grander scale. There had to be other ways of keeping kids off of drugs in the first place—before they got to this point.

After getting mildly burned out after only a year of intervention work, I was scared and worried that I had chosen the wrong profession. I struggled with the idea that maybe I just couldn't hack it in social work. I refused to let this get me down and realized that the problem was not me or social work as a profession—simply that a traditional social work job was not for me.

There had to be something new, different, and innovative—a way to help people on a larger scale. Almost fatefully, as I was headed back to school toward an MSW—hoping to find my passion and a livable salary in social work—I was asked to help out with a newly formed “experiment in prevention” called the Montana Meth Project. As a former and recovering meth addict, I was invited to share my story as part of one of the first radio ads. You can listen to it at:

http://www.montanameth.org/View_Ads/radio.php#
(click link and then scroll down to Caitlin's story)

After volunteering in a variety of other capacities, I had the opportunity to begin my field placement at the Meth Project and observe the campaign from the beginning.

The Montana Meth Project is a hard-hitting, statewide media campaign with the goal of reducing first-time meth use among 12- to 17-year-olds. At this point, no one knew if the “experiment” was going to work. Everyone remembers the truly dreadful, “This is your brain; this is your brain on drugs” campaign. Was the Montana Meth Project going to have the same fate? As it turns out, no.

Immediately after the launch of the campaign, we were flooded with positive feedback from across the state. People were excited about the anti-meth message and the edgy and eye-catching advertising the Meth Project was splashing across televisions, radio stations, and billboards statewide. The ads were reality-based, conceptualized by a creative media company after conducting a variety of focus groups with former meth addicts. The radio ads present real people, former meth addicts, telling parts of their story. The television ads are shocking, but as any former meth addict will tell you, they are very realistic and depict situations similar to those most addicts have been in.

The billboard ads are shocking and to the point—one ad, in particular (shown on the next page in PDF version), shows a filthy public bathroom with a caption that says, “No one thinks they'll lose their virginity here. Meth will change that.”

The campaign also features two Web sites—one for general information about the campaign and a resource for parents, educators, and concerned citizens, and the other a resource aimed specifically at teens. Folks from around the state can submit and share their stories on both Web sites. Each Web site includes information about the meth project, about meth, about the ads, and ways to get involved. The Internet aspect of the campaign provides a great resource that anyone can access quickly and easily. All of the television ads end with the URL referring teens and others to one of the Web sites.

As the state's leading advertiser, it was not surprising that the campaign was getting so much attention. But were we making our desired impact?

These days, we know the answer is yes. Since the inception of the project in September 2005, the Montana Meth Project has had dramatic results on meth use in Montana. According to a 2007 report, “Montana teens, young adults, and parents are more aware of the dangers of taking meth, more likely to disapprove of taking the drug, and more likely to have had parent-child discussions about the subject,” since the inception of the project in 2005 (GfK Roper, 2007, p. 3). “In fact, teens now view meth as more dangerous than heroin and few teens of any age see a benefit in taking meth—more than 80% believe there are substantial risks in taking the drug” (GfK Roper, 2007, p. 3).

Because of its innovative and creative nature and because the research has shown the campaign produces results, the Meth Project has received considerable national attention. I even had the opportunity to be on the CBS Early Show and ABC's Nightline, speaking about the project as a recovering addict. Not only has the Meth Project been recognized nationwide, but it has now been adopted in Arizona, as well, as the Arizona Meth Project (Arizona Meth Project, 2007). It appears that other states are catching on, and there is hope that each state may have its own Meth Project one day. Not only has the project gotten national attention from the media and been adopted in other states, but the White House has taken notice, as well. The White House National Drug Control Policy Director, John Walters, said:

Montana is seeing communities once paralyzed by methamphetamine emerge healthier and safer because of a balanced and comprehensive approach. Senator Conrad Burns has been a strong leader in the fight against meth, and his work, along with that of the Montana Meth Project, local law enforcement, and area treatment providers, is making a difference in the lives of Montanans. As a nation, we must build on the progress made in Montana by continuing to use research-based, creative public awareness campaigns to educate young people about the dangers of drug use; to implement science-driven, effective treatment programs for those whose lives have been torn apart by meth addiction; and to rid our communities of the criminals who produce, traffic, and sell this poison (as cited in "White House Press Release," 2007, p. 1).

Two years later, research shows that the Meth Project is having its desired impact in Montana. The question remains, though--why is the Meth Project so effective compared to its earlier counterparts, such as the "This is your brain on drugs" campaign? The answer could lie in the Meth Project's unique business plan.

The business plan is relatively simple. "Every day, young people in Montana are making product consumption decisions regarding meth. Many perceive benefits in using meth. Many perceive little risk in using meth. Unfortunately, many are making the decision to give meth a try. This is the root of the meth problem" (GfK Roper, 2007, p. 80). With these assumptions, the Meth Project treats meth as a consumer product--just like, say, Coca-Cola would approach selling its products. The difference is, the Meth Project's media campaign is trying to un-sell a product rather than sell it. Meth is a consumer product that is easy to get, reasonably priced, and--to all too many people uneducated about its horrors--attractive and cool. The media campaign is geared toward un-selling meth to Montanans, "arming the youth of Montana with the facts about meth so they can make a better informed product consumption decision" (GfK Roper, 2007, p. 80).

With overwhelming positive feedback statewide, the Meth Project launched a statewide public art contest less than a year after its inception. The Paint the State art contest challenged Montana teens to create some form of highly visible public art to be on display during a certain period of time. The contest was a success with 660 total entries in Montana's 56 counties. Paint the State was a unique idea and basically helped the Meth Project get its target population involved in the project, while the public art reinforced the anti-meth message with hundreds of anti-meth advertisements around the state. According to the same survey, Paint the State was a huge success in raising awareness about the dangers of meth while involving Montana teens and their parents in a statewide anti-meth movement (GfK Roper, 2007, p. 46).

As I continued my journey through the MSW program and my field placement at the Montana Meth Project, I remained intrigued by the idea of using media and other technologically advanced means to conduct social work on a large scale. More traditional areas of social work--for example, the treatment center where I was employed--can be effective and worthwhile. But as our society advances technologically, social work needs to advance as well and take advantage of the new and evolving resources as they become available. Using the media as a resource to get messages across can be, if used correctly, an effective tool to saturate our communities with positive social messages. If done right, media campaigns might even be more effective than techniques we are currently using. These days, communication is easy and accessible. Although social workers typically use a personal, face-to-face approach when dealing with clients, who is to say that--at least for some purposes--mass communication is not just as effective, if not more so?

With this mindset, I continued to explore other areas of social work and the media. I quickly was inspired to learn more about the Ad Council--a private non-private organization that has been around since World War II and organizes its messages around three key themes--health and safety, education, and community--placing a special emphasis on children. The Ad Council has played a role in some of our most popular and memorable icons and slogans over the years, including: Smokey the Bear, McGruff the Crime Dog's "Take a Bite Out of Crime," and "Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk." The Ad Council has been around since the 1940s and might just be one of the most prominent organizations producing effective public service messaging campaigns (Ad Council: Story of Ad Council, n.d.). It is a resource for social workers--one that most of us don't even consider as an option.

Big Brothers Big Sisters used the Ad Council to conduct a nationwide push for new mentors: "Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) provides one-to-one mentoring relationships between adult volunteers and children in 460 programs throughout the U.S. This campaign encourages individuals to volunteer for BBBS and share simple, life-changing moments with a child" (Ad Council: Mentoring, n.d.). They had staggering results. In previous years, BBBS would usually receive approximately 90,000 new applications to become a mentor annually. In just nine months after the launch of the campaign, that number soared to 620,000 (Ad Council: Mentoring, n.d.). In fact, their ad campaign worked on me. After seeing a commercial to become a mentor, I jumped online, filled out an application, and within weeks I had a little sister.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has gotten on board. NASW has implemented a multi-media campaign to reach a variety of goals--increase the public's awareness of and respect for the profession, educate the public on the nature of the profession and who can benefit from our services, attract young people to the field, and improve employment opportunities for professionals (Social Work Public Education Campaign, n.d.). NASW believes a national multi-media campaign can help reach these goals. After extensive research across the country about public perceptions of the social work profession, the multi-media campaign was born. (Help Starts Here, n.d.)

The NASW campaign also has a Web site with a variety of different resources that can be accessed by the public, the media, policymakers, employers, and social workers. The Web site, <http://www.helpstartshere.org>, contains information about the social work profession, ways to find a social worker, and much more (Help Starts Here, n.d.). The campaign is

too new to know if it's working, but it is interesting to see our professional association using media as a way to gain greater recognition among the general public.

As a young social work professional, I feel it is important to constantly be exploring innovative ways social workers can tap into new and non-traditional systems to promote our agendas. Be it drug prevention, mentoring, or public education about the social work profession, the media and the Internet can be powerful resources for us all. It is important to remember that through our work with individuals, families, and communities, we are not limited to traditional forms of social work practice. Continuously looking for ways to improve our society through alternative and innovative means is a goal we should strive for and consider while practicing in the field. Media and other technology are revolutionizing our society--why not take advantage of it as social workers to promote positive social change?

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Caitlin T. Moe, BSW, is currently completing her graduate program at the University of Montana, where she will earn her master's degree in social work. She also earned her B.A. in social work at UM. Her future endeavors will focus on educational consulting for troubled teens, which has been both her academic and professional focus. Caitlin has worked with the innovative Montana Meth Project, the Teen Recovery Center, and is currently doing her final field placement with Missoula Youth Homes.