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Controversial meth ads coming to Wyoming

by Carol Crump

Sunday, April 20, 2008 10:32 AM MDT

Crystal looks like a lot of young women you see hanging out at the mall or the coffee shop.

The streaked blonde hair, bar bell earrings and the black "Jesus Loves Me and My Tattoos" T-shirt and black jeans don't give her away.

She could be just any pretty 22-year-old, until she fills the syringe and injects meth straight into a large vein in her neck that's already bruised yellow from earlier injections.

The Kalispell, Mont., young adult was filmed as part of an HBO documentary on the Montana Meth Project. The same large-scale exercise in prevention is coming to Wyoming.

The new Wyoming initiative is under the umbrella of the Montana Meth Project, a media saturation campaign conceived by software billionaire Thomas M. Siebel.

In Montana, the campaign's shockingly graphic ads have been so successful that the state dropped from number five in the nation in 2005 for meth abuse to number 39 in 2007. Teen meth use dropped by nearly 50 percent during that period.

"No doubt it's graphic, but when you look at the impact on public education, it's good stuff, good stuff," said Casper Police Chief Tom Pagel.

In addition to Montana, Idaho, California, Hawaii, Illinois and Arizona already are using the campaign.

The Wyoming Meth Project will have the same simple message as all of the campaigns: "Meth -- not even once." The message-driven campaign soon will be blanketing the state with prevention-oriented television, radio, print ads and billboards.

The ads, which originally featured Montana young people, will be redone with Wyoming meth users.

Casper's meth problem

Wyoming's initiative is unique in its funding. So far, what will be a two-year project that could touch every corner of the state is totally funded by foundations.

The McMurry Foundation, which spearheaded bringing the project to Wyoming, has been joined by the Daniels Fund and the Ellbogen, Tate, Myra Fox Skelton, Tonkin, Ann and Scott Nickerson and Casper Area Community foundations.

The Siebel Foundation is also a backer, and the Wyoming Meth Project will have access to the same advertising agency and material used in Montana and the other participating states.

The Wyoming Meth Project's first executive director, Jean Davies, is no stranger to the state's methamphetamine problem. She was one of the first to step up 6-1/2 years ago when Pagel and Tate Foundation put together the Community Facilitation Initiative on meth.

"We all stepped up" to recognize that Casper had a really, really bad problem, to talk about it and do something about it, Davies said.

"So many wonderful things happened from that," said Davies, who left a 22-year career at Wyoming Behavioral Institute to take over the reins of the new campaign.

According to Davies, the Wyoming Meth Project is part of the continuing efforts of the Meth Initiative. Through the efforts of its own director, Mike Burnett, advisory subcommittees and outreach programs, and the business community's commitment to drug testing, Davies said the number of people in Natrona County who report meth as their primary drug has dropped from 27 percent to 11 percent.

The data is collected from Natrona County substance abuse professionals, who have been sharing assessment and treatment data at monthly meetings for at least 10 years.

Part of Davies' responsibilities with the Wyoming Meth Project will be to encourage other counties to do the same kind collaboration and data gathering to address what she said is definitely still a statewide problem.

As the project's only employee, she'll be visiting the Wyoming's county and community stakeholders about ways to improve public awareness and education.

A look at the ads

The ads -- which Davies expects to start in June or July -- focus on preventing young people from using the highly addicting drug in the first place.

The campaign's ads are graphic and disturbing, and involve kids smoking, snorting or shooting the drug, stealing and selling their bodies, and openly discussing the drug's physical, mental and emotional effects on their lives.

In one ad, a girl mindlessly plucks out her eyebrow in a drugged state. In another, a handsome teenager vows he won't end up like "that guy," a skinny, shaking addict with body sores. A former star athlete talks about the stretch marks left from the muscle tone he lost in his back during the first month he used meth.

The ads are tested in focus groups of teenagers to be sure they're shocking enough to get attention but not unbelievable.

"Kids are real and talk to other kids," so they know kids that have done drugs and still look just like all their friends, Davies said.

She said the Wyoming Meth Project will be asking for community help, including possible state funding, once enough statewide data is gathered in the future.

For information, call Davies at 268-7136.

To see the Montana ads, log on to www.montanameth.org.

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