

Meth 'epidemic' slows, felonies decrease

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CASPER - Methamphetamine is no longer "the epidemic" it was five years ago, but it is still a problem for Casper, according to Natrona County's district attorney.

Michael Blonigen said that overall, felonies in the county have decreased for three straight years.

"A reduction in meth use is directly responsible for this," Blonigen said.

In 2005, there were 185 misdemeanor possession of meth charges and 115 felony meth charges, Blonigen said. In 2008, there were only 75 misdemeanor meth charges and 52 felony charges.

The shift is due to a communitywide effort to prevent and treat meth use, he said.

A major component of that effort has been the Wyoming Meth Project, which seeks to educate and deter youth from trying meth even once through an aggressive and graphic ad campaign.

The project, which began in the state in April 2008, released its first year of data earlier this month.

The "Wyoming Meth Use and Attitudes Survey," completed by GfK Roper Public Affairs and Media, showed more teens and young adults understand the "great risk" of trying meth even once.

"There is a stigma around it," said Jean Davies, executive director of the Wyoming Meth Project. "That's good. More businesses are drug testing and that is helping. Kids have become more aware of the disadvantages of doing something like meth."

Roper completed a benchmark survey in April 2008 and followed it with the same survey in April 2009 to determine the impact of the project so far.

The report shows "pretty positive" results, said Casper Police Chief Tom Pagel, though there is still a lot of work to be done.

Highlights include:

- 62 percent of teens believe there is a "great risk" in trying meth once or twice, up from 53 percent in 2008.
- 73 percent of teens believe there is a moderate or great risk of meth making problems worse, up from 64 percent in 2008.
- 70 percent of teens believe there is a moderate or great risk of meth causing them to have sex with someone they don't want to, up from 57 percent in 2008
- 47 percent of teens saw or heard an anti-meth commercial once a week, up from 35 percent in 2008.
- 72 percent of teens "agree" Wyoming Meth Project ads made them less likely to try or use meth.

Roper surveyed 913 Wyoming teens at 19 randomly selected schools and 300 residents between the ages of 18 to 24.

"The purpose of the Wyoming Meth Project is to increase awareness and education of the issue," Pagel said. "I think (the report) shows that."

Also, in 2005, 26 percent of people in substance abuse treatment in Wyoming said meth was their drug of choice. In 2008, that number was 9 percent, Pagel said.

Davies said the drug court system, more treatment centers and collaboration of law enforcement are also playing key roles in combating meth.

However, "People have a tendency to declare victory too early," Pagel said. "We still have a problem with meth ... It's way, way too early to declare victory."

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