

Wyoming Meth Project is making a difference

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It would be a mistake to give all of the credit to the Wyoming Meth Project's advertising campaign for driving down methamphetamine use in the state.

By the same token, it would be a mistake to dismiss the campaign's graphic anti-meth ads as having no effect on the behavior of young people.

The bottom line is that the downward trend in meth use in Wyoming is an extremely positive development, likely a result of a number of factors -- including the Wyoming Meth Project. And as long as the trend is headed in the right direction, we should continue the current efforts to stamp out the dangerous drug.

The Wyoming Meth Project held a news conference Friday to announce the results of its latest survey on meth use and attitudes in the state. The numbers show that the anti-meth campaign launched in 2008 has caught the attention of young people, making them less likely to try the drug and boosting awareness of the risks of using meth.

The release of the Wyoming survey results came just a couple of days after the publication of a study showing that the Montana Meth Project's multimillion-dollar ad campaign, which serves as a model for the Wyoming organization, likely has had little to no effect on the drop in meth use in Montana. The drug was on the decline in that state before the ad campaign was launched in 2005, mostly because of more aggressive law enforcement, and the anti-meth ads have done nothing to accelerate the drop, concluded economics researcher D. Mark Anderson of the University of Washington.

We're not in a position to say whether Anderson's conclusions are valid or not. But the fact that Wyoming and six other states have launched programs similar to the Montana Meth Project shows plenty of people see it as something worth emulating. Officials say it is clear that meth use is dropping in Wyoming, and the new survey results show that there has been a significant shift in the attitudes toward meth among Wyoming teens. It stands to reason that changes in attitudes will drive changes in behavior.

The Wyoming Meth Project is supported by numerous private backers and the Wyoming Department of Health. It aims to reduce first-time meth use through public service messages on TV, radio and print; public policy; and community outreach. (Full disclosure: Star-Tribune Publisher Nathan Bekke is president of the Wyoming Meth Project's advisory board.)

The anti-meth ads are graphic and disturbing. They feature sober youth talking about how their lives became horrific after using meth, and shows them stealing, prostituting themselves and dealing with how their health has been ravaged by the drug. And according to the new survey results, the ads are having an impact.

Some 71 percent of Wyoming teens report seeing anti-meth ads at least once a month, and 86 percent say they've seen or heard a meth-related ad in the past month. Just under three-quarters of Wyoming teens agree the ads made them less likely to use meth, and 82 percent said the ads showed them that the drug is more dangerous than they had originally thought.

"The survey results tell me we have made significant progress in educating Wyoming teens about the dangers of using methamphetamine," said Rodger McDaniel, director of the Mental Health and Substance Abuse Division of the Department of Health. "The data show teens agree the campaign is effective, and that its message is reaching Wyoming's young people. By giving them the facts, we have helped them understand there is great risk in using meth."

Changing attitudes among young people, effective law enforcement and increased treatment opportunities all deserve a share of the credit for the decline of meth in Wyoming. Let's keep the momentum going.