



Wyoming Meth Project is making a difference

Thursday, October 20, 2011 12:00 am

A video shows a teen in a kitchen, rifling through a purse. The boy's mother enters the room and he knocks her down, pockets the cash and leaves her crying on the floor.

Another shows an older man leaving a motel room after having sex with a young girl. He pays her pimp/boyfriend, who enters the room and puts one arm around her as he pulls out some meth. Her body is bruised and she's an emotional wreck.

A stark photograph shows a filthy public restroom. The accompanying text says, "No one thinks they'll lose their virginity here. Meth will change that."

These are just a few of the graphic images that have been shown throughout the state by the Wyoming Meth Project. The ad campaign began in 2008, modeled after a similar one that was successful in reducing meth use in Montana.

At the time some critics contended the ads were too harsh for young viewers. But that was precisely why the organizers of the project believed they would be effective: they reflected the reality of the dangers of using meth even once.

(Full disclosure: Star-Tribune Publisher Nathan Bekke, an editorial board member, is the chairman of the Wyoming Meth Project and recused himself from this editorial.)

Methamphetamine use can unquestionably cause people to steal, be violent, and have sex with people they don't want to be with so they can get more money to buy drugs. It can ravage a user's health and make them feel hopeless.

Three years after the campaign began, there is evidence that it is changing people's opinions about the drug. The underlying theme — "Meth. Not even once" — is making a difference in Wyoming. The Wyoming Meth Use and Attitude Survey results, which were released this week, found that 62 percent of teenagers see "great risk" in trying the drug just once or twice. That's 9 percent higher than the survey results three years ago.

A total of 85 percent said they strongly disapprove of using meth. That statistic shows that demand for the drug is decreasing among youth, typically the biggest market for meth dealers to try to exploit. The survey reflects the views of 1,226 junior and senior high school students from throughout Wyoming. Eighty-one percent of the students reported feeling that trying meth once or twice could turn them into someone they don't want to be — a 13 percent increase compared to the 2008 survey. These are positive results, but absolutely no reason to declare victory in the fight against meth and go home. The U.S. Department of Justice still lists meth as the primary drug threat in Wyoming, as it has been for several years.

The survey results also show us that methamphetamine is still a big problem in the state. Even though meth arrests are down and the number of law enforcement raids on meth labs have declined in recent years, the drug is still far too available.

Twenty-three percent of the students surveyed reported that meth is easy to acquire. Eleven percent have been offered the drug.

More than one in 10 teens said they have a close friend who uses meth, and 15 percent have had a family member treated for meth use.

Sixty-three percent of the teens surveyed said they have advised friends not to use meth. The positive side of that statistic is that nearly two-thirds of the students tried to steer their peers in the right direction. However, it also indicates that many teens felt the need to counsel their friends because they had expressed some interest in using the drug.

We know that the anti-meth messages are reaching a large audience. Eighty-eight percent of Wyoming teens said they have seen or heard one, and for half it's at least a once-a-week experience. But with meth so readily available to many teens, and some still not convinced it is addictive or dangerous, the Wyoming Meth Project needs to continue its work. Fortunately, its members are totally committed to the task.