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Wyoming Meth Project is influencing young people

Star-Tribune Editorial Board

The message of Wyoming's most visible anti-drug campaign is apparently sinking in: "Meth. Not even once."

The number of misdemeanor possession of meth charges in Natrona County has dropped significantly, from 185 in 2005 to only 75 last year. Felony meth charges here have decreased for three straight years, from 115 in 2005 to 52 in 2008.

Part of the credit belongs to the new substance abuse treatment program at the Central Wyoming Counseling Center, which has helped addicts stop taking the drug, which has been used at epidemic levels in this community for years.

Another factor has been the success of the Wyoming Meth Project, a public awareness campaign that began in April 2008. (FYI: Star-Tribune Publisher Nathan Bekke is a member of the project's board of directors.)

The Wyoming Meth Project is modeled after a program that has been used in Montana and other states. It aims to reduce first-time meth use through public service messages on TV, radio and print; public policy; and community outreach.

The project's meth prevention campaign is graphic, and the message stays with people long after they've seen the spots. 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.

To some people, the ads may be too disturbing. They are indeed difficult to watch. But people who deal with meth users -- including judges, lawyers and law enforcement -- say they're accurate. If anything, they contend, the ads aren't graphic enough to convey the real-life dangers of meth use. The second wave of anti-meth commercial messages, which are even more intense, debuted in June.

As Casper Police Chief Tom Pagel noted, it's way too early to declare victory in the fight against meth simply because the number of people being arrested for it has decreased. But progress is definitely being made.

The Wyoming Meth Project's emphasis on keeping youth from even trying the drug is appropriate, since it should reach a new generation that could become addicts without such intervention. It's startling, but Wyoming now ranks number one in the nation for meth use by both young adults ages 18 to 25, and by those 12 and older.

The project's second statewide survey to examine the attitudes and perceptions that Wyoming teens have toward meth use was released earlier this month. Sixty-two percent of teens now believe there

is "great risk" in taking meth just once or twice, compared to 53 percent a year ago.

Furthermore, 72 percent of teens and 79 percent of young adults said the Wyoming Meth Project ads made them less likely to try or use meth. And 86 percent of young adults in Wyoming said friends would give them a "hard time" if they should ever use the drug.

Jean Davies, executive director of the Wyoming Meth Project, thinks she knows why the program has been successful. "There is a stigma around (meth use). 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."

Some day, as the Wyoming Meth Project continues its work, it may become obvious to people at an early age that trying meth is a bad idea. For now, though, it's a message youngsters can't hear too often.