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Methamphetamine Prevention Education: Extension Responds to a National Issue

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Methamphetamine Prevention Education: Extension Responds to a National Issue

Abstract

Methamphetamine is quickly becoming one of the nation's most dangerous drugs, affecting people of all socio-economic categories and geographic locations. In response to this emerging crisis, MSU Extension specialists developed a range of research-based programs and materials, in collaboration with key state agencies, to combat rising meth use in one rural Western state. The materials have been widely distributed and results indicate that the materials are having positive effects on meth use, production, and awareness. As a result of this cooperative effort, valuable lessons have been learned that can help other states deal with critical social issues.

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Background

Methamphetamine (or simply meth) has become the most dangerous drug problem of small-town America (National Association of Counties, 2006). Traffickers make and distribute the drug in some of our country's most rural areas. In addition, 12- to 14-year-olds who live in smaller towns are 104% more likely to use meth than those who live in larger cities (Bachtel, 1984; Drug Enforcement Administration, 2003). In the current climate, Extension has an important role to play in drug abuse prevention education, especially in the meth problem that is sweeping the nation (Goldberg, Spoth, Meek, & Molgaard, 2001; Hill & Parker, 2005).

Meth is unlike any other illegal drug. Meth is highly addictive, and meth addiction is difficult to treat (Woodward, personal communication, 2006). While meth is not a new problem, it has recently surfaced again as a major problem in rural states in the West and Midwest. What began as a problem drug in Hawaii, meth has continued to spread from west to east (National Association of Counties, 2006).

Meth Production

One of the reasons meth is such a threat in rural America is because it is cheap and easy to make. Drugs that can be bought over the counter at local stores are mixed with other common ingredients to make meth. Small labs to cook the drug can be set up on tables in kitchens, garages, or just about anywhere. Although super-labs, operated by sophisticated traffickers, still supply the majority of meth, smaller tabletop labs have increased exponentially in the last decade, setting an alarming trend.

Curiously, meth has been around for a number of years. For example, a 1970 New York 4-H publication about drugs and youth cited meth as a significant drug concern (Freije, 1970). While meth abuse is not a new issue (Freije, 1970; Astroth, 1989), the current crisis is real, and purer forms of meth are creating new concerns about the impacts of addiction to meth.

Meth Addiction

Meth is a powerfully addictive and violent drug. Addiction to methamphetamine carries with it a high risk of developing a range of severe, long-term effects. Meth use can cause depression, anxiety, mood changes, paranoia, and other psychological disorders that create dire consequences for users (SAMHSA, 2005; Woodward, personal communication, 2006). Moreover, meth use can cause extreme physical and cognitive deterioration. There are *no* short-term or long-term benefits to using meth--only damages. Recent studies have demonstrated that meth causes more damage to the brain than alcohol, heroin, or cocaine (SAMHSA, 2005; Woodward, personal communication, 2006).

Effects on Youth

In Montana, the meth problem is especially acute among both youth and adults. According to data from the 2005 Montana Youth Risk Behavior Study, for example, 8.3% of Montana high school students admitted to using methamphetamine (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2005). This compares to 7.6% nationally. This level of use is of concern because during adolescence, youth are making decisions that will affect the rest of their lives. Peer pressure and the desire to fit in--among a multitude of other risk factors--can lead to high-risk behaviors, including drug use. Early initiation into drug use is a significant risk factor for negative consequences later in life (Hawkins, Lishner, & Catalano, 1987). Because the outcomes for long-term meth users are so detrimental, we must start early to educate children about the dangers of meth use.

Additionally, though, innocent children are often victims of meth users. Thousands of children are neglected every year after living with parents who are meth "cooks" or meth users. National statistics show that 32% of the children taken out of homes where meth is manufactured or distributed test positive for the drug (Montana Department of Justice, 2005). In 2003, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reported that 3,300 children were found in 8,000 meth labs seized (DEA, 2003).

Effects on Adults

Meth affects all kinds of people, regardless of age or income. With respect to adults, one judge has estimated that meth-related trials consume two-thirds of his time on the bench (Montana Department of Justice, 2005). For example, in 2004, 48.3% of adult federal sentences in Montana were drug-related. Nearly 75% of these adult cases were meth-related, compared to 15.5% nationally (U.S. Sentencing Commission, Office of Policy Analysis, 2004). Finally, over 60% of the women in the state women's prison are there on meth-related charges (Montana Department of Corrections, 2004).

Extension As a Resource

In 2001, Montanans were shocked to learn about a brutal drug murder of a teen in the far eastern part of the state--in rural Glendive, Montana, a small town of less than 5,000 people near the North Dakota state line. As the details became available, we learned that a 16-year-old boy had been murdered and his body burned and mutilated--all over a methamphetamine deal gone bad. In response, the community invited the Montana Attorney General, Mike McGrath, and an MSU Extension youth development specialist to appear at a community forum to help the community explore solutions and next steps to this new and emerging problem.

As a result of this meeting, discussions began with various divisions of state government about developing prevention materials targeted to both youth and adults that might address this problem. At about the same time, MSU Extension agents in the northeast part of the state met to strategize the best use of Extension resources to meet local needs. The discussion focused on an emerging ominous, destructive force that was sweeping through their communities, leaving a trail of broken families, disrupted lives, and environmental hazards, such as toxic dumps and polluted water sources. The meeting ended in an urgent call to action against a common problem: methamphetamine.

The Montana Extension Service held community meetings around the state in November 2003, and meth surfaced as one of the most consistent concerns expressed by community members. As a result of this grassroots input, MSU Extension faculty began to craft a comprehensive statewide response for preventing meth use among its young people and for dealing with the impacts of meth use in local communities.

Extension Responds

Addressing Adult Issues

In 2003, the Montana Department of Justice provided a grant to MSU Extension Housing and

Environmental Health to develop a community toolkit focused on meth prevention, education, and awareness. The purposes for creating this resource were to (1) provide factual, research-based content about the meth issue to the public; (2) develop consistent messages about meth; and (3) ensure a persistent, on-going message recognizing that effective prevention requires an enduring message in order to affect behavior change over the long term.

At about the same time, then Governor Judy Martz launched the Meth Watch Program fashioned after a similar community program in the state of Washington. This program was designed to focus community attention, particularly among retailers, on the dangers of meth and enlist the community in curbing the availability and access to common, everyday ingredients used in the meth production process. The objectives of these efforts were to:

- Reduce meth use among adults,
- Reduce the prevalence of meth production in the state,
- Educate the Montana public about the dangers of meth addiction and its impacts on communities, and
- Equip a range of people with information about how they could be alert to the presence of meth in their community and what they could do about it.

These meth-watch materials were originally incorporated into the Extension meth community toolkit.

Addressing Youth Issues

Shortly thereafter, in June 2004, the Montana Office of Public Instruction released an RFP requesting proposals to develop educational PowerPoint programs that schoolteachers could use to educate students about the dangers of meth use. A team of faculty members at MSU came together to develop a proposal in response to this RFP. The team consisted of a youth development specialist, a 4-H youth member, a family life specialist, a nutrition specialist, a medical doctor, the director of the Social Norms Project, and a housing and environmental health specialist. A teen youth team member was added to ensure that any products would have youth appeal. MSU was successfully awarded the contract in July 2004.

Working with a diverse community advisory committee, the MSU design team created 10 animated educational programs using PowerPoint. The advisory included several teens, faith-based community members, law enforcement, parents, teachers, counselors, tribal representatives, policy-makers, and substance abuse specialists. The group met on several occasions to review drafts and make suggestions for improvements. Early versions of the programs were also pilot-tested with over 2,000 students.

Bridging the Digital Divide

Why craft educational programs using PowerPoint rather than some other delivery method? Because many schools in our state still lack access to technology and because the Internet is accessed by dial-up in many places, PowerPoint was selected as the one approach by which most schools would be able to deliver these educational programs to students. *Tools for Schools*, a CD of educational presentations, resources, and tools, emerged as an easily accessed product that all teachers could use with students, regardless of location or lack of advanced technology. This CD-ROM of resources was developed to help teachers educate youth about the dangers of meth use and addiction, and do so in an easy format.

In order to ensure that teachers would feel comfortable with the materials, a series of 12 workshops was held around the state to train teachers in how to use the materials. These workshops were conducted by MSU Extension faculty and reached more than 700 teachers statewide. Evaluations from the workshops indicated that teachers were highly likely to use the educational programs once they had participated in the workshops.

Putting It All Together

Through a collaborative partnership with the Montana Department of Justice and the Office of Public Instruction, MSU Extension brought all these efforts together in the *Meth Toolkit for Community Educators and Teachers*. The toolkit provides comprehensive but easy-to-understand information and educational tools related to the prevention and detection of methamphetamine use and production. The toolkit serves as a self-guided and self-contained teaching tool for meth prevention education programs. Some of the contents include:

- Meth insert focus cards aimed at increasing awareness for:
 - People who spend time outdoors
 - Homes, rental properties, motels and storage units
 - Retailers and pharmacists
 - Auto rental and repair shops
 - Agricultural producers and retailers

- Filler ads
- Public Service announcements
- Posters
- Bookmarks
- Meth videos
- Meth PowerPoint presentation
- Leader's Guide
- Basic meth informational brochure
- Tools for Schools, which includes 10 dynamic PowerPoint presentations targeted to teens for use by teachers and other community educators. All of the presentations were developed from a positive youth development perspective that avoids the overuse of scare tactics to bring home the message to teens. The presentations reflect an emphasis on primary prevention coupled with factual information appropriate to the target audiences:
 - **For Middle School Students**
 - Basic Information About Meth
 - Resistance Skills
 - Meth and Your Future
 - Dieting and Body Image
 - **For High School Students**
 - Basic Information about Meth
 - It Can't Happen to Me
 - Friends and Meth
 - Media Advocacy
 - Meth & Impacts on Families
 - Meth and Impacts on Community

Each PowerPoint presentation comes with:

- A detailed lesson plan for community educators,
- Teaching tips,
- Suggested additional activities,
- Key vocabulary,
- Additional resources, and
- Web links

A "Jeopardy"-style game is also included to test youth's knowledge about subject matter content and the dangers of meth. All units are designed to be taught in 20-30 minutes, with additional supplementary activities that take more time.

Materials are designed to be used by:

- English teachers,
- Physical education instructors,
- Family life teachers,
- Health educators,
- Parent groups/PTAs,
- Drug-free schools and community coordinators,
- 4-H and other youth group leaders,
- Camp counselors, and
- Faith-based educators

Finally, Montana agencies have worked together to create one universal Web portal for information and resources about meth. This "one-stop" shop has served the citizens of our state well by providing consistent, up-to-date information about meth. Visit the site at:

Program Impacts

Short-Term Results

Since 2004, MSU Extension's collaborative efforts with the Montana Department of Justice and the Office of Public Instruction on meth prevention have reached into every corner of the state. In addition, the meth community toolkit has been in high demand in other states.

During 2006, meth prevention education programs and meth resources were offered and distributed to all counties in Montana. During this period, counties reported collaborating with a variety of groups and organizations:

- County road crews,
- Public schools,
- Storage unit owners,
- Real estate agents,
- Law enforcement,
- Retail groups,
- Chambers of Commerce,
- Landfill and solid waste operators,
- 4H volunteer organizations,
- National Conference of State Legislatures,
- Tribal Nations Conference,
- Regional meth prevention coalitions, and
- The Montana Department of Corrections

In addition, the following short-term outreach efforts were reported.

- Extension faculty conducted 64 school and community workshops on the meth using Extension Meth in Montana Toolkit for Community Educators and Teachers.
- Extension faculty provided train-the-trainer sessions, training over 700 teachers and other community leaders throughout Montana.
- To date, Extension has distributed nearly 4,000 copies of the *Meth Prevention--Tools for Schools* CD-ROM.
- More than 269,000 Montanan's have received meth awareness and prevention education materials.

As a result of the Meth in Montana Tools for Schools initiative, the following impact results were collected from surveys at several schools.

- 80% of students could correctly identify at least two toxic ingredients used in the production of meth.
- 80% of students could identify and name three negative effects of using meth.
- 100% of students responded that there was never a good reason to use meth.
- 92% of students could name at least one positive alternative to lose weight.
- 96% of students could correctly identify signs of meth abuse.
- 100% indicated that they would be unlikely to take meth in the future.
- 81% of students could name two things they would do if they suspected a friend was involved with meth use.

While these are self-reported data, the results are positive and indicate that the majority of

students have learned information as a result of participating in the meth education programs.

Long-Term Impacts

As a contribution to the comprehensive and statewide outreach efforts put forth by the state of Montana, the MSU Extension Service helped contribute to the substantial reduction of meth labs in Montana during 2006. For example, in 2002, the number of meth labs that required the removal of hazardous materials peaked at 122. In 2005, that number dropped to 29. Since October 1, 2006, the Drug Enforcement Administration has reported only one meth lab in Montana (Montana Department of Justice, 2007). While direct cause/effect is not possible to substantiate, all of the partners working together with the same goal in mind have helped contribute to this reduction in meth labs.

Other changes are occurring as a result of these multifaceted efforts to combat meth in Montana. According to the semi-annual Drug Testing Index, Montana's overall rate of employees testing positive for meth fell more than 70% between 2005 and 2006. It was the biggest decrease in the country. Information reported to the Montana Board of Crime Control showed the total number of meth-related offenses dropped from 1,259 in 2005 to 589 in 2006.

In addition, the percentage of high school students who have reported using meth dropped from a high of 13% in 2001 to 8.3% in 2005 (Office of Public Instruction, 2005). The report notes that a survey of middle school and high school students administered by the Department of Public Health and Human Services showed that 93% of respondents perceived meth use as having "great risk." Finally, 2007 data from the Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey shows that meth use among teens continues to decline—now self-reported at 4.6% (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2007).

Lessons Learned

Based on our experiences, we would offer the following recommendations to others considering similar initiatives.

1. *Focus on education, not just awareness.* In critical issues like drug abuse, a little education can go a long way towards making the public aware of the nature and seriousness of the problem. Broad, generalized public awareness campaigns, while momentarily eye-catching, do little to arm people with enough information to take action. Education can result in behavior change. Educational efforts on drug issues must include drug-specific information, positive alternatives to drug use, and a focus on life skills, such as decision-making.
2. *Cultivate relationships with key political allies.* In this instance, having the support of both state justice officials and state education officials were keys to gaining legitimacy and support across the state. The collaboration with these two agencies helped with the dissemination of the project, particularly the school programs. Working closely with these kinds of stakeholders is essential to communicating the cooperative nature of such efforts and builds good will in the long run.
3. *Develop a statewide strategy.* In drug prevention, the most effective approach is to have a statewide strategy that can be delivered to every corner of the state, emphasizing the same consistent, persistent messages. Extension's strength is its presence in every county, so educational strategies should capitalize on this presence.
4. *Provide a variety of resources.* Communities and individuals want to have a range of materials and resources to address modern issues. They like to have a variety of materials—posters, rack cards, DVDs, PowerPoints, fact sheets, bookmarks and similar materials to carry out an educational campaign.
5. *Stay involved for the long-term.* As seat belt campaigns have shown (Perkins, 1998; Perkins & Linkenbach, 2002), changing behavior requires a long-term effort. Results will not be immediate and patience and persistence are needed to ensure long-lasting effects. Changing social norms is difficult and only occurs from long-term efforts. Extension should provide support and sustained involvement on such issues in order to make a difference. Prevention education is hard work and requires more than passing laws or quick-fixes.

Conclusion

A successful effort to reduce meth use in the nation must be based on a multi-faceted campaign that includes prevention, intervention, treatment, and aftercare. Many efforts have been put into place to combat the production and use of methamphetamine among adolescents, but prevention remains the key to changing the future. As Montana Attorney General Mike McGrath has observed, "We cannot arrest, prosecute and jail our way out of the meth problem. Law enforcement is an important part of the answer, but it must be balanced by equally strong treatment, education and

prevention efforts" (Vogel & Astroth, 2005).

The rise and spread of meth use and abuse in Montana shows the vital role that Extension can play in educating the citizenry of a large state about the multi-faceted dangers posed by a social health problem. No other organization was as well-equipped as Extension to respond to this problem; develop sound, research-based materials; and evaluate their impact. As a result, meth use is declining in our state and our materials are eagerly sought out by other states.

Most recently, the Tools for Schools meth prevention education project was recognized by USDA as a CSREES Program of Distinction. Tools for Schools has also been presented at two national Extension conferences. These results attest to the central role that Extension can play and the recognition it can earn for addressing critical social issues. The future of Extension resides in ongoing efforts like these to stay current and relevant with social issues at the heart of communities that want to create positive environments for children, youth, and families.

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