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Crystal meth use here called worst in nation

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Hawai'i has the worst crystal meth problem in the country and it is destroying families and communities, U.S. Attorney Ed Kubo said yesterday.

Kubo, speaking to a presidential commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, cited alarming statistics on methamphetamine use in Hawai'i:

- 40 percent of people arrested by police in Honolulu tested positive for methamphetamine use, according to a Justice Department report. No other city came close to 30 percent, Kubo said.
- 30,000 Honolulu residents are hard-core users of the highly addictive drug and as many as three times more are recreational users.
- Substance abuse — with crystal meth as the No. 1 drug of choice — is associated with 90 percent of the 2,300 confirmed child-abuse cases in the state each year.
- In a town on the Big Island, 50 percent of teenagers are addicted to crystal methamphetamine.
- Drug use has had a role in 44 percent of the state's homicides, Kubo said. Much of the state's most high-profile violence, including the shootout between police and Arnold Willets earlier this month in Kane'ohe, has been linked to crystal meth use.

Meth users who support their habits through burglaries, shopliftings, robberies, purse snatchings and car thefts have helped to raise Hawai'i's larceny-theft rate to the highest in the United States, Kubo said.

"This drug is directly linked to the destruction of families and a deterioration of the social fabric in Hawai'i," he told the commission.

The commission, mandated by executive order to "increase opportunities and improve the quality of life" for Pacific Islanders and Asian Americans, met yesterday afternoon at the State Capitol to hear testimony on health, economic and community development, education and migrant/immigrant issues in the state.

The commission is holding meetings across the country before making recommendations to the president.

"I want to report to you that crystal methamphetamine, also known as batu, speed and ice, poses

one of the most serious public health issues in Hawai'i and the Pacific region today," Kubo told the commissioners.

He called for increased spending to make drug treatment programs available to more prison inmates and to make longer treatment programs available to those on probation and parole.

He also called for more residential treatment programs and urged the health insurance industry to increase coverage to well beyond the 30 days maximum.

He said Hawai'i's youths and their parents need to be educated about the health dangers of the drug. Law enforcement agencies, he said, must be given more money to stem the flow of drugs to Hawai'i.

The drug is more addictive than cocaine and harder to kick than heroin, Kubo said. It is thought to cause irreversible brain damage and can make users psychotic, paranoid, schizophrenic and violent.

According to state statistics, 90 percent of Hawai'i's prison inmates are drug addicts, Kubo said. Yet only 6 percent of state prison inmates get drug treatment.

Treatment programs for people on probation and parole are not nearly long enough to counter addiction; health insurance programs pay for only 30 days of treatment, a fraction of what's needed; and as many as 300 people a day are on the waiting list for the few residential programs in the state.

"Drug treatment programs with a lack of funding are a losing gamble," said Kubo, expressing concern about a "growing health epidemic."
