

NORTH CAROLINA NEWS

Hawaii official advises counties to press on in meth fight

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By AUDREY McAVOY / Associated Press

Billy Kenoi of the Hawaii County mayor's office has a message for communities besieged by methamphetamine: Don't give up.

"You save one man, you save one person — he's no longer abusing his wife, he's no longer neglecting or abusing his children," Kenoi told some 150 county officials from Florida to Washington state gathered in Honolulu on Monday.

"There are multiple stories of success. We can't give up," Kenoi said. "It's too important."

The National Association of Counties' first-ever "town hall" session on methamphetamine offered no miracle solutions for defeating meth, an illegal drug blamed for boosting crime and child abuse across the nation.

Instead authorities spoke of the need to attack the problem from all angles: Law enforcement, treatment, and preventive education in schools. Working closely with federal and state governments is also important.

Eddie Wright, a commissioner in Vance County, N.C., said he was worried methamphetamine use would spread in his community because of its low cost.

Wright, whose county, area, a largely rural area north of Raleigh and Durham, has only just begun to see an influx of the drug, said he would take home what he learned in Hawaii.

"This gave me some insight as to what to look for in our young folks as well as some older people who might be using that drug," Wright said. "It gives me an idea that we are not by ourselves and that there are other people we can network with and that's very important."

The association highlighted the vast reach of the meth plague earlier this month when it said that nearly 90 percent of counties surveyed reported a rise in meth-related arrests over the last three years.

In addition, more than half of the nation's sheriffs interviewed said they considered meth the most serious problem facing their departments.

Hawaii was one of the first states to suffer an influx of methamphetamine — also known in the islands as crystal methamphetamine or "ice" — with police officers here detecting sales of the drug in the late 1980s.

On the Big Island of Hawaii, Kenoi said his county obtained advice and assistance from substance abuse facilities across the country by writing them for help.

The county also succeeded in securing federal help against the drug by making a strong case to Washington that Hawaii County's efforts could offer lessons to other communities.

"A lot of naysayers, and people who don't want to roll up their sleeves and get in the trenches and do the hard work that it takes to save people in our community — people say the recidivism rate is so high, you'll lose 60 to 70 percent back to ice," Kenoi said.

"They're looking at it the wrong way. You're saving 30 to 40 percent."

Methamphetamine has challenged counties in many ways.

Child welfare agencies say rising numbers of children are being removed from their homes because their meth-addicted parents neglect or abuse them.

Meth users are also packing jails. The counties association survey showed 50 percent of counties estimate one-fifth of their jail inmates were caught for committing meth-related crimes.

Among the anecdotes shared Monday was the story of a 14-month old toddler wandering Oregon city streets in diapers because the baby's parents were strung out on methamphetamine. Another was of a Hawaii meth addict who fatally stabbed his mother and aunt before burning down their suburban Oahu home.

Grass roots demand for action has prompted the counties association to form a task force to tackle the drug.

"This clearly is now a national epidemic. This is something that is continuing to move across the country," said Jane Halliburton, the methamphetamine action team's new head and the supervisor for Story County in Nevada, Iowa. "It is not isolated in any particular area — whether it be a geographical area or rural, suburban, urban."

On the Net:

National Association of Counties: <http://www.naco.org/>