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Meth Project targets youths

Aim is reducing first-time use of dangerous narcotic through outreach, media

*By Eloise Aguiar
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The Hawaii Meth Project kicks off today at the Kalihi YMCA, citing a new survey that says 30 percent of Hawai'i teens believe there is no risk to trying meth, and 19 percent say it's readily available.

The statewide drug prevention project targets youths 12 to 17 years old and is aimed at reducing first-time methamphetamine use through a community outreach program and aggressive — some would say graphic — media campaign that begins today.

In one radio spot, Gloria, a 15-year-old recovering drug user, confesses:

"When you're doing ice, everything is fast, everything is going like 500 mph, and all you can think about is getting high. And then I started doing things I normally wouldn't do. I would have sex with my dealer for money. I would have sex with guys for money. I lost myself completely in one month."

Hawai'i has one of the nation's worst meth problems, ranking behind just four other states in a 2007 survey measuring meth use.

Meth is one of the most addictive, destructive drugs in terms of the financial burden and human cost, said Michael Broderick, lead judge of the Special Division of First Circuit Family Court.

"Once someone has begun using, it's very difficult to get them to stop," Broderick said. "The Hawaii Meth Project is crucial to our efforts to combat this epidemic by preventing our young people from ever trying meth."

In Hawai'i the perception among youths is that meth is good and consequences are minimal, so using it once or twice is not a problem, said Cindy Adams, executive director for the Hawaii Meth Project.

"It's really alarming that kids see significant benefit with meth use in the way of weight loss, increased energy and alleviating boredom," Adams said. "They don't correlate risk with use."

The television portion of the project's Not Even Once campaign shows young, vibrant teens promising to try the drug just once, then spiraling out of control, losing their good looks, selling their bodies and turning to crime to sustain a habit they thought they could control.

Radio ads made from testimonials by recovering teen drug users like Gloria will also be used.

Gloria goes on to say in her ad: "I lost my friend. (He) hung himself because of it, because he couldn't handle hearing all the voices he heard," Gloria said. "My friends were all selling their bodies. They're in jail. Two of them are dead."

Adams acknowledged that some people might have a visceral reaction to the spots, but she said the kids say this is what gets their attention.

Before the campaign, the Meth Project surveyed 1,065 teens, 318 young adults and 400 parent of teens. Their replies demonstrate the need to change youths' perception, Adams said.

The 2009 Hawaii Meth Use & Attitudes Survey found that one in three teens believes there is little or no risk in trying meth, 35 percent believe it can help you lose weight, 24 percent believe it gives you

energy, 21 percent believe it can make you happy and 19 percent believe it helps alleviate boredom.

The survey also shows that teens and young adults are at high risk of exposure to meth, with 19 percent of the teens and 36 percent of young adults reporting that meth is readily available.

According to a 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 7.3 percent of Hawai'i 10th-graders said they had used meth, up 87 percent from 2005. National surveys on drug use and health conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that Hawai'i ranked fifth in the nation for meth use by people 12 and older as recently as 2007.

Besides the television and radio ads, the project will place posters in areas where youths visit and run banner ads on www.MySpace.com, a popular Internet destination for youth ages 12 to 17.

Eight radio spots were made from interviews with Hawai'i teenage drug users. Their names and neighborhoods were changed to protect their identities, but their stories are real, Adams said.

Lucien, 18, would use the rent money to buy his drugs and he said he didn't care when his mother would cry about it.

"I started doing meth when I was 12 years old," Lucien said in his radio spot. "My mom used to cut open her pillow and put her wallet inside and sleep on the pillow. It was so hard for her to trust us."

Alan Shinn, executive director of Coalition for Drug Free Hawaii, said meth use is reportedly down in the Islands, but the state's love affair with the drug persists. He said preventive education is a proven way to reduce the problem.

When Montana launched the first such Meth Project in 2005, it was ranked No. 5 in the nation for meth use. Two years later, meth use among teens had dropped by 45 percent, and Montana ranked 39th.

"(Hawaii Meth Project) is looking at youths who have not ever used it, so they're trying to keep them from using it at all," Shinn said. "So for some of them, yes, I think it will be very effective, and for others, I think we're going to have to look at other methods or strategies."

Additional Facts

About the project

The Hawaii Meth Project is a new nonprofit founded specifically to fight the methamphetamine problem in Hawai'i. The group joins a handful of other states as part of the Meth Project. The project began in 2005 in Montana and has since expanded its programs into Arizona, Idaho, Illinois, Wyoming, Colorado and now Hawai'i.

Members and backers of the Hawaii Meth Project include a range of business, civic and community leaders from Honolulu, Kaua'i, Maui and the Big Island.

It is funded by a grant from the Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation.

The project also has an outreach component and is looking for volunteers. To volunteer, call Cindy Adams at 529-6253

For more information, visit www.HawaiiMethProject.org after 10 a.m. today or go to www.methproject.org.
