

Local News

Meth problem in spotlight

Mayor, doctor and judge among speakers who tackled issue at forum

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Astute television viewers have noticed over the last few months a new series of graphic commercials designed to shock them into learning the dangers of methamphetamine.

The ads are easy to recognize. In general, healthy, attractive teenagers agree to try meth "just this once" and soon devolve into shrunken, disease-ridden shadows of their former selves.

One emergency room technician, however, told the executive director of the Hawaii Meth Project that the ads weren't graphic enough.

Such is the danger of meth, ice, or speed, the easily manufactured, highly addictive drug that drew about 30 people to a forum in Hilo.

The Hawaii Meth Project is part of a large, targeted effort among several states to prevent the use of the drug among teenagers and young adults. Up to now, the project has been best known for blanketing the television and radio stations with advertisements designed to bring out the true cost of the drug. The meeting in Hilo -- and one planned for Kailua-Kona on July 28 -- is part of that effort.

Speakers included Mayor Billy Kenoi, Third Circuit Judge Greg Nakamura, physician Christopher Linden and community policing officer Jesse Kerr.

"And just realize that this isn't a criminal justice issue. That this is a community issue. This is a family issue," Kenoi said. "And because this impacts everybody in the community, everybody in the community needs to be part of that solution. Nobody has an answer. It's not an easy answer.

"I think we all recognize that it's going to take everybody doing their part to really sustain this effort and that's where the Hawaii Meth Project, I think, really adds a lot of value."

Cindy Adams, executive director of the anti-meth organization, said the ads were crucial in reducing the amount of abuse in Montana.

Following the start of the Montana Meth Project, the state had gone from fifth in the nation for meth abuse in September 2005 to 39th in two years.

Today, Adams said, Hawaii occupies the No. 5 slot for meth use among those age 12 and up. Forty-three percent of federal convictions in Hawaii involve meth use. And 7.3 percent of 10th-graders have said they used meth. The drug abuse costs Hawaii \$500 million a year.

Adams also showed photos of drug users from across the country, several months apart, in what has been popularly known on the Internet as the "Faces of Meth." She also showed close-up photos of the particularly gruesome phenomenon known as "meth mouth," where the teeth and gums of users rapidly decay and fall out.

The TV ads were staged to show the effects of meth, but the radio spots featured real stories of Hawaii teens.

In one ad, "Kaleo," 16, tells how he started using meth at age 12 and would sleep on the streets. Adams said that he was picked off the streets of Chinatown, spent 30 days in the hospital, but ran away prior to being discharged to get another hit.

In another spot, "Jessica," 17, of Kailua-Kona speaks of how she would sell her body to get meth. Adams said that Jessica would be attending the Kona meeting.



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Dr. Christopher Linden, one of five speakers at a Friday evening community forum sponsored by the Hawaii Meth Project, discusses some recent scientific advances in deterring methamphetamine addiction. Other speakers included Mayor Billy Kenoi, Circuit Court Judge Greg Nakamura, Hawaii Meth Project Executive Director Cindy Adams and Community Policing Officer Jesse Kerr. - William Ing/Tribune-Herald

Kerr, the police officer, passed around seized glass vials as examples of drug paraphernalia, and a small packet of the drug itself. He told of how attorneys and Honolulu police officers have been hooked on ice.

"It's scary stuff. I've never seen anything like it," Kerr said.

"When you talk about a meth user, you're talking about someone who has a great deal of loss," said Nakamura, the drug court judge for East Hawaii. "A meth user has a hard, hard time coming back."

The next meeting will be 6-7:30 p.m. July 28 at the Kealakehe High School Library. For more information, call (877)-445-METH.

On the Internet: <http://www.hawaiimethproject.org>.

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