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Hawaii Meth Project: Don't — 'even once'

Surveyed youth still see dangerous drug as a way to lose weight, get more energy

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KAHULUI - A narcotics police captain, a judge and the island's medical examiner provided real-life stories and statistics to underscore an anti-methamphetamine campaign aimed at young people across the state.

The message: "Not Even Once."

It comes from the Hawaii Meth Project, a statewide program aimed at significantly reducing first-time meth use through public service messages, public policy and community outreach.

The Meth Project does not offer treatment for addicts but rather emphasizes the importance of shaping public policy and the perception of crystal methamphetamine, also known as ice in Hawaii, particularly among young people.

Second Circuit Judge Joseph Cardoza said the typical advice a criminal with a history of methamphetamine use gives to a young person is: "Don't get started."

Cardoza said he quickly learned in Drug Court and in countless criminal cases that there's no such thing as a casual meth user.

"The phrase I see very often is: 'I thought I could quit whenever I wanted to. But now I know I can't,'" he said during a Hawaii Meth Project program held last week at Maui Community College.

Cardoza said he was once overwhelmed when he attended a Christmas party for Drug Court participants who appeared to be on the road of recovery. The judge said he was struck by the 250-plus children of the adults participating in the drug rehab program.

"Prevention is far better than working on the cure," he said. Addicts tell him, time and time again: "There's no in between. You can't use a little bit."

About 60 people showed up for Hawaii Meth Project last week. Other speakers included Mayor Charmaine Tavares, Capt. Gerald Matsunaga of the Maui Police Department Vice Division and Maui County Medical Examiner Dr. Anthony Manoukian.

Tavares opened by describing ice as "one of the most terrible drugs in our community."

Matsunaga said that, in both his personal and professional life, he has seen the addiction in children, young adults and senior citizens for two decades now.

"The drug has no prejudices," he said, adding that people of all races, genders and economic and social statuses have all fallen prey to methamphetamine.

On the streets, Matsunaga said, he's seen the tragic effects that addiction to the drug has had on families. With methamphetamine costing an average of \$200 to \$250 a gram, people resort to crime to pay for their habit. Eventually, they lose their material possessions, their jobs and, often, their close relationships with family.

"I've seen people steal from their parents. . . . It's very bad when they steal from their parents," Matsunaga said.

He said he's seen only three or four people "cured," or gotten rid of their addiction, the first time they tried to shake it off. "Everybody else I know has gone back to it, at least one time," Matsunaga said.

Like Cardoza, Matsunaga is hopeful that prevention will work to stop people from taking methamphetamine. He advised parents to pay attention to who their children's friends are and what

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Capt. Gerard Matsunaga of the Maui Police Department Vice Division has seen the tragic effects of methamphetamine use on families. "I've seen people steal from their parents. . . . It's very bad when they steal from their parents," he said.

they're doing, particularly at night.

Manoukian said he started tallying meth-related deaths in 1995 and has since counted 110 through 2008. But the doctor, who serves as the coroner's physician for the Maui Police Department, said he believes that number doesn't represent all the deaths linked to the drug.

Meth-related deaths are those in which an autopsy shows methamphetamine in the blood at the time of death. Manoukian said there are many other deaths that are exacerbated by the use of meth, but they may not count statistically because the drug wasn't present in the body at the time of death.

Of the 110 deaths he tallied from 1995 to 2008, 80 percent of them were males, Manoukian said. The youngest victim was 16. Most meth deaths are of people in their 30s and 40s.

Cindy Adams, executive director of the Hawaii Meth Project, said her office's radio and TV ads have been targeting 12- to 17-year-olds. Many of the ads feature young addicts in Hawaii talking about how the drug has harmed their lives.

A 17-year-old Kailua-Kona girl, for example, admitted she had become a prostitute to support her habit.

"I always despised girls like that. I became one," she said in an ad shown Wednesday night.

Meanwhile, a 16-year-old boy from Waianae, Oahu, spoke in a separate radio commercial about starting meth at age 12. "I wish I could take back the pain I caused," he said, referring to the impact his drug use had on his family.

Adams read off statistics collected just last month in a statewide survey about teens' attitudes and knowledge of methamphetamine and addiction to the drug.

Thirty-five percent of those participating in the Meth Project survey believed that ice would cause them to lose weight. Another 24 percent said the drug gives people more energy, and 21 percent said it makes people happy.

About 19 percent of teens surveyed said methamphetamine was easy to acquire, and fewer than half said they'd spoken to their parents about the drug within the last year. "That's an important statistic because we know parents (and) families can influence whether a teen takes drugs or not," she said.

According to Adams, Hawaii ranks fifth in the nation for percentage of people 12 and older who use methamphetamine. She said the Meth Project will continue to offer public service programs to reach more young people and their families.

For more information, go to www.hawaiimethproject.org.

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