

"Graphic anti-meth ads are catching on; Illinois has joined a national campaign to scare kids away from the addictive drug"

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BY: John Gramlich

When MTV fans in Illinois tune in for music videos, they may instead see a clip in which a hooded young man rushes into a neighborhood Laundromat, brutally assaults a middle-age customer and robs him while a family -- baby in tow -- watches in horror.

When Comedy Central fans in Arizona switch on "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," they may be greeted by images of a teenager being savagely beaten in an empty parking lot at night, his assailants kicking him until one of them raises a cinder block above his head and brings it down.

In Idaho, plans are in the works for a number of TV channels to show images of a teenage girl stepping into the shower only to discover her own hollow-faced, scab-covered likeness cowering on the floor of the bathtub.

ADS CREDITED FOR METH DECLINE

All three states are replicating a highly touted advertising campaign that began in Montana and centers on a series of shocking and graphic TV commercials intended to grab the attention of viewers -- especially young people -- and warn them about the dangers of methamphetamine, a highly addictive drug identified as a leading cause of crime nationwide.

The states have jumped at the chance to debut the ads at home, largely because of what many consider a success story in Montana. The state last month announced a nearly 50 percent drop in reported meth usage among high school students since the Montana Meth Project, a private advocacy organization founded by billionaire businessman and philanthropist Tom Siebel, introduced the ads two years ago.

According to a report by the Montana Office of Public Instruction, 4.6 percent of the state's high schoolers now say they have tried meth, compared with 8.3 percent in 2005. State leaders have directly connected that decline with the ad campaign, despite the already decreasing use of meth in state high schools between 1999 and 2005.

"If it'll work in Montana, it'll work anywhere," Sen. Jon Tester (D-Mont.) said at a recent news conference in Washington, where the state's congressional delegation joined Siebel and Julie Gerberding, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to announce the state's meth decline and tout the ads.

At least seven other states -- Alaska, California, Iowa, Indiana, Oregon, Kentucky and Washington -- are taking steps toward airing the ads as part of an anti-meth initiative announced last month by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. Utah, meanwhile, has created its own public awareness drive against meth, aimed specifically at women ages 12 to 45, whose use of meth has increased in that state.

Funding for the anti-meth ads varies from state to state, but comes from private backers as well as state and federal grants.

SICKLY FACES OF ADDICTS

The ads now being aired in Illinois and Arizona and soon to air in Idaho are the same as those created in 2005 by Siebel's Montana Meth Project. The organization, which has grown into a

national group called the Meth Project, provides the ads to states for free, though states must pay for air time.

The campaign consists of 12 separate TV commercials -- often aired during prime time on channels popular with young people -- accompanied by billboards, print ads and radio spots.

The 30-second TV commercials take various approaches to warn viewers about meth's dangers. In "Jumped," for example, a narrator explains that he would rather be the victim of a brutal parking-lot assault -- shown during the commercial -- than be involved with meth.

Other ads portray the sickly faces of supposed meth addicts, who are shown assaulting and stealing from others to support their habits. The commercials, which are being shown only at night to prevent young children from seeing the graphic images, all feature a simple slogan -- "Meth: Not Even Once."

"You've got to hit these kids between the eyes because they think they're invincible," said Greg Sullivan, executive director of the Illinois Sheriffs' Association, which helped bring the ads to Illinois. "You've got to show them what this drug will do to them."

Illinois has funded its campaign primarily through federal dollars delivered by Sen. Richard Durbin (D-Ill.), Sullivan said.

TOO GRAPHIC FOR SOME VIEWERS

The ads are not without controversy. Sullivan said he has received some complaints about the graphic nature of the ads. Utah, meanwhile, decided against using the commercials because officials there wanted to target women up to 45 years old instead of teenagers, and wanted to convey a different message.

Utah's \$2 million, state-funded campaign, called End Meth Now, is intended to dispel stereotypes about meth users by focusing on women in their child-bearing years, who increasingly are turning to the drug in the state, according to Mary Lou Emerson, director of the Utah Substance Abuse and Anti-Violence Coordinating Council.

"There's a lot of pressure in Utah for women to be the perfect wife or the perfect mother, and there's something attractive about meth [to them]," Emerson said. "It may appear attractive at the beginning, but it's a very addictive substance. Part of the campaign is trying to get the accurate facts and information about meth out."

To see the print Meth Project ads, go to: methproject.org/View_Ads/print.php; to see the video ads, go to ww.montanameth.org/