

Illinois Meth Project expands to Lawrence County

Lab numbers down, usage still a concern

By Ashley Smith

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The Illinois Meth Project recently announced the expansion of its program into Lawrence County to aid in combatting the ongoing abuse of methamphetamine in the area.

U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin secured \$200,000 in federal funding in fiscal year 2008 to give the Illinois Sheriffs' Association additional resources to support this expansion into southeastern Illinois, which also includes Clark, Crawford, Edwards, Jasper, Richland, Wabash, Wayne and White counties. Previously, Durbin secured \$180,000 in fiscal year 2006 to help kick off a Meth prevention campaign in central and southern Illinois.

The project is a large-scale prevention program aimed at significantly reducing first-time Meth use through public service messaging, public policy and community outreach. The campaign launched in Illinois on Feb. 11, 2008, and is based on the Montana Meth Project, which has contributed to a 45-percent reduction in teen Meth use and a 72-percent decrease in adult Meth use in that state.

Although the number of meth-manufacturing laboratories in Illinois has declined over the past several years, Illinois Meth Project Executive Director Steve Mange said the usage of Meth, especially in the southeastern region of the state, is still a notable and serious concern.

"Meth use remains a very serious problem in your neck of the woods," Mange said. "With our campaign, even from the beginning, we decided not to focus on running our ads in the Chicago area because on a per capita basis, even on an absolute basis, they don't really have a Meth problem - aside from the gay community - in comparison to the rural areas of the state."

According to Illinois State Police, the number of meth lab seizures in 2005 was a staggering 973 compared to just two years later in 2007 when numbers decreased by more than half with a total of 446 seized labs.

"It's great to see the number of labs decreasing so significantly, but the decline in use is trailing pretty far behind," Mange said.

According to a survey conducted by GfK Roper, 22 percent of junior-high and high-school students in the Springfield-Champaign area said Meth would be "very" or "somewhat easy" to acquire, and 11 percent said they have been offered the highly-addictive stimulant.

"Perhaps the most disturbing thing about that survey was that a quarter of the students [26 percent] said they believed there to be only a slight or no risk involved in trying Meth once or twice," Mange said.

This statistic sheds light on the surprising fact that 72 percent of people in treatment for Meth in Illinois began using at 17 years old or younger.

Even before The Illinois Meth Project was initiated, local volunteer organization Cra-Wa-La received a three-year grant in 2006 from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to help in the fight against Meth abuse.

"The grant helps to provide therapy to juveniles and their families and increase community awareness," Project Director Tammy Boose said. "We also are working with schools to develop prevention groups among the youth so they have a part in this as well."

Local law enforcement agencies are also doing their part to sequester Meth use.

"The Meth situation has improved slightly but it hasn't gone away," Lawrenceville Police Chief Mike Mefford said. "We will continue to aggressively approach the situation through traffic stops and investigations, as well as follow-ups from reports through the Neighborhood Watch program. We're not going to back off."

For more information about the Illinois Meth Project, visit www.illinoismethproject.com.