

Chicago Acts Against Meth

By Veronica Vidal

Not immune to the once largely rural meth epidemic, Chicago is considered a distribution hub in a major meth pipeline that transports pseudoephedrine tablets from Canada to “superlabs” in the western United States and Mexico, and distributes finished meth to other cities across the country. In 2003, the Drug Enforcement Administration seized more than 17 million pseudoephedrine tablets in Chicago. As this pipeline feeds addictions, meth has become a growing concern in Chicago’s gay community, where it is referred to as crystal, Tina or Crissy. According to a study conducted by the Chicago Department of Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 1 in 10 Chicago gay men reported using crystal meth at least once in 2003, out of a sample of 1,251 men. That’s a 10 percent experimentation rate. “While I wouldn’t call that number a crisis or an epidemic, it’s certainly a lot higher than the national average,” explains Jim Pickett, co-chair of the Chicago Crystal Meth Task Force and director of public policy for the AIDS Foundation of Chicago. On the national level, 7 out of 1,000 males, or about 0.7 percent reported using meth at least once. Meth poses great risk to the gay community because it impairs sexual choices and increases the risk of acquiring or transmitting HIV or other STDs.

“Toward the end of 2004 and in early 2005, there were a couple of very high profile incidents of gay men who were connected to crystal having really tragic outcomes. One event involved the death of a taxi driver; another involved a high-profile person in the community who was arrested for possession and distribution of crystal,” Pickett said. “This really shook the community.” In February 2005, on the heels of these incidents, the AIDS Foundation of Chicago and the Chicago Department of Public Health created the Chicago Crystal Meth Task Force, which is comprised of more than 20 service providers and community and government leaders. The task force hit the ground running with a \$1 million social marketing campaign that targeted gay men who have not tried meth, encouraging them to stay away from it.

“Sometimes it takes an event that is the tipping point to cause people to really pay attention,” Pickett said. From the tipping point of the taxi driver’s death and the prominent man’s arrest, the cooperative vision to prevent meth from gaining a stronghold in the gay community took shape.

The task force’s Crystal Breaks campaign was created pro bono by Lapíz, a division of Leo Burnett, and debuted in

August at Chicago’s Northalsted Market Days, just six months after the coalition formed. Print ads, public service announcements on cable and mobile billboards depicted images of men on shattered glass along with facts about meth.

“It was very thoughtfully planned and executed. The idea was to get the community talking, to start making them more aware of crystal,” Pickett said. The first stage of the campaign is over and is being evaluated to determine its effectiveness and steps for the second phase. Additionally, the task force is re-evaluating its own objectives, Pickett reports. “Now we have an opportunity to step back and say: ‘We aren’t as reactive right now, and while we still want to pay attention to meth, what do we want to do with this task force, where do we want to take it?’”

While current meth laws help protect citizens from the hazards of meth labs, punish meth makers with tough penalties and curb the sales of pseudoephedrine and ephedrine for meth production, Pickett says there is interest in doing more advocacy work and a need to address the underlying issues triggering substance use, such as depression, isolation and loneliness: “We want to see more treatment- and prevention-oriented policies and funding.”

Adding to the anti-meth media blitz undertaken by the Chicago Crystal Meth Task Force, Prevention First, the Illinois affiliate for the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, has launched new public service announcements developed by the Partnership and the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. From toxic meth fumes reaching through apartment walls to a meth addict obsessively plucking his eyebrows into bloody

wounds, these announcements combine real-life stories of people impacted by meth with scenarios that show the unique secondhand threat it poses to communities at large. Created at no charge by Chicago’s Leo Burnett and by J. Walter Thompson in New York, all of the spots can be viewed on a microsite on the Partnership’s Web site, www.drugfree.org/meth.

Vidal is the Communications Specialist for Prevention First.

For more information on the Chicago Crystal Meth Task Force, visit www.crystalbreaks.org. For additional resources on meth in Illinois visit www.drugfree.org/il or www.prevention.org.

