

Meth Crash

Will critical incidents help turn the tide?

By Veronica Vidal

Ordinary people, from housewives to truck drivers to teens, are caught in the grip of addiction. Children are being neglected. Communities are being exposed to toxic waste and deadly explosions. Law enforcement officials, neighbors and innocent bystanders are being injured.

With its distinct urban and rural cultures, Illinois is facing the methamphetamine problem on two fronts. In Chicago, meth addiction is fed largely by cartels that manufacture large quantities of the drug in Mexico, then sell it in major cities, according to Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan. The urban population of gay men has been particularly affected by meth, known in the city as a party drug. In southern, central and northwestern Illinois, most meth is produced in small, makeshift “labs” using ingredients commonly found at drug stores, hardware stores and farm supply centers. Users include working mothers who are trying to “do it all” to over-the-road truck drivers trying to stay awake to teens.

According to the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (ICJIA), meth is the only drug for which rural areas have higher rates of seizures and treatment admissions than urban parts of Illinois. Statistics from the ICJIA show that meth arrests accounted for 34 percent of all drug arrests made by Multijurisdictional Drug Task Forces in 2004 and a stunning 58 percent of all arrests made by mostly rural task forces. The number of meth-related child neglect and abuse referrals to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services skyrocketed from 150 in 2002 to almost 450 in 2004.

Meth is leaving a wake of devastation. Its highly addictive nature affects the central nervous system of its users, deteriorating their health, sometimes within weeks. Many addicts stop working, eating and showering. Meth contaminates homes with toxic fumes and wastes, endangering the health of neighbors, passers-by and, especially, children. Meth depletes counties of their resources in law enforcement, health care, social services and child care.

Meth incidents have catapulted a burgeoning problem into the spotlight, capturing our collective attention and leading to strong action to help alleviate it. In Illinois, the spread of methamphetamine use and production has prompted state officials and local communities to respond with prevention and intervention methods aimed at reducing the sharp rise in arrests, treatment and need for social services.

Legal Action

On the state level, law makers are moving to increase pressure on meth producers. New statutes have been enacted that require mandatory jail time for making meth where children are present or where they live, as well as for manufacturing meth in hotels or apartments, where other people could unknowingly be affected.

The Illinois Methamphetamine Precursor Control Act went into effect on Jan. 15. Drafted by Attorney General Madigan and sponsored by Rep. John Bradley (D-Marion) and Sen. William Haine (D-Alton), this new law requires stores to keep all medicines containing pseudoephedrine or ephedrine – key meth ingredients – behind counters or in locked cases.

Although customers do not need a prescription to purchase these products, they must show photo identification and sign a log. The products cannot be sold to minors, and consumers are limited to two packages in a 24-hour period. The law hits close to home for Rep. Bradley. A car with a mobile meth lab exploded near his home.

“We had a chance to work to prevent this five or six years ago, but no one was interested because we didn’t have any critical incidents.” John Shadowens

Warnings by the U.S. Attorney’s Office and experts from across the nation in 1999 gave Illinois prevention professionals an idea of how meth affected other states, but it could not prepare them for the enormity and urgency of the situation that took shape here. While preventionists worked to create awareness through community forums, public interest on the topic was minimal as recently as five years ago.

“The reaction came from a building of awareness among professionals that said, ‘We’ve got to get the community involved, and the community needs to be aware because this is impacting so many sectors,’” recalls Martha Head, who serves as the InTouch Coordinator for the state’s most southern region (Prevention Service Area 18). In 2000, Head’s InTouch staff traveled throughout the region presenting eight community forums called Looking into the Future of Substance Abuse.

But the efforts of preventionists could not initially generate widespread community action against meth in southern Illinois. Rather, it was the incidents happening to everyday people that gained widespread attention. For instance, “A Franklin County trash collector picked up [meth] trash that caused an explosion,” Head remembers.

“We had a chance to work to prevent this five or six years ago, but no one was interested because we didn’t have any critical incidents,” states John Shadowens of Franklin-Williamson Human Services. Today, professionals in the prevention, intervention, treatment and law enforcement fields credit not one, but many incidents for new laws and the formation of coalitions to combat what many call a monster of a drug.

For Shadowens, one particular case that stands out involves a mother who bought a house in Murphysboro, Ill., unaware that it was previously a meth lab. Within weeks of moving in, her three children developed respiratory problems, and she was getting ill, too. The family went to the hospital and tested positive for methamphetamine. “What [that case] really highlighted was that we were not coordinating well on this. Meth was popping up in so many different areas,” Shadowens said.

Local Action

Now, local communities have taken notice, and taken action. The Southern Illinois Meth Control Project unifies 24 agencies and community groups that had been working individually on the meth problem. Together, they are sharing information, resources and effort. The coalition project is working on a prevention and education program that creates awareness of the many dangers of meth, as well as trains citizens on how to identify and report meth activity. Shadowens oversees the project, which was initiated by a \$50,000 grant from Southern Illinois Healthcare (SIH) to Franklin-Williamson Human Services. A media campaign is already underway. More than 20,000 brochures have been distributed, and public service announcements are being shown at movie theaters. Television and billboard ads are being developed to extend the reach of the campaign.

Southern Illinois Healthcare, a system of hospitals and health care facilities throughout the region, recognized in awarding the grant that anti-meth efforts should focus on prevention. Woody Thorne, Director of SIH Community Benefits, explains that the need for his organization to be proactive on meth became evident as the administrator of SIH’s Herrin Hospital related more and more stories of meth users and their families pouring into the emergency room. “We’ve seen law enforcement and the judiciary entities working to address methamphetamine, but we really haven’t seen efforts on a prevention side as much. We felt this was a void we could help fill,” Thorne said.

Getting Personal

Kathleen Cox, who works at Herrin Hospital as a registered nutritionist, dietician and manager of the food and nutrition department, is glad that her employer is taking action. Cox’s own life was changed by meth when she took in her two grandchildren after they were removed from their home that was being used as a meth lab. Cox’s son, the children’s father, was serving in Iraq at the time, and their mother had become addicted to meth. The children, who were then ages 2 and 5, suffered emotional as well as physical abuse. Since then, their father has returned from duty and taken custody of them. “I should’ve seen the warning signs,

and I didn’t,” Cox says. “I’m not happy that it happened to my grandkids, but I’m glad they’re out of it, and I’m glad I can talk about it.”

That personal critical incident motivated Cox to take action in her community. As an active member of the Williamson County Coalition Against Methamphetamine Abuse, she tells her cautionary tale, called *For the Love of Jacob*, at schools, civic clubs and community groups.

Meanwhile, SIH is working with various state agencies and with the attorney general’s office to improve documentation of the meth-related cases coming into its hospitals, which cover six counties. SIH has also sponsored regional trainings on meth for medical and service professionals and is working with the Department of Children and Family Services to develop medical protocols to address the needs of children who have been removed from seized homes.

Optimistic Outlook

“From our standpoint, it is increasingly important to reduce the demand,” Thorne says. “If you can educate the population, especially our young people, on the damaging effects – the way it can ruin individuals’ lives, families’ lives – then our hope is that far fewer people will put themselves in a position of even trying it in the first place.”

All the efforts put forth have developed a strong force of preventionists, treatment professionals, elected officials and law enforcement professionals, but the unpredictability of meth users is constantly pushing them to stay ahead of the game. “This is so different. Even law enforcement will tell you it’s a whole different animal in terms of how to fight it, but we are very encouraged,” said Head, of the InTouch office.

Shadowens is also optimistic about the situation, stating, “We’re about to turn a major corner. We’ve been fortunate to work with the attorney general’s office really closely. The states that have implemented similar [laws] have reduced their meth lab seizures by as much as 60 percent in the first year.”

Head, Shadowens and their peers are hoping that dedication, hard work and targeted efforts can turn the tide against meth.

Vidal is the Communications Specialist for Prevention First.

For more information on the Southern Illinois Meth Control Project, visit www.methcontrol.org. One of the project’s community partners, John A. Logan College, will host the third annual Methamphetamine Awareness Conference in Carterville, Ill., July 18 and 19. Visit www.jal.cc.il.us/bus_ind/ for details.