



Seeking strategies to battle meth

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A new set of strategies to deal with the growing methamphetamine problem in Santa Barbara County is set to go into effect by year's end.

This new attack promises to be multifaceted and aimed at the people who use and the people around them, says Kathy Gallagher, director of the Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services and executive sponsor of the Methamphetamine Prevention Network.

Speaking at a network lunch meeting with Rep. Lois Capps, D-Santa Barbara, at the women's recovery center Casa Serena on Monday, Ms. Gallagher said, "We want families in Santa Barbara County to be drug-free and self-sufficient."

As the number of people using methamphetamine rises -- 67 percent of addicts in the county now say it's their drug of choice -- the damage to the user and beyond is spreading.

Clandestine labs used to produce the drug are hazards to the people inside as well as nearby residents, and these labs tend to leave behind toxic waste. Arrests for methamphetamine use are up, as is the number of children in foster care because the adults in their lives are in custody or treatment because of their addiction.

"The effect that the meth has on parents is that they can't take care of their kids," said Ms. Gallagher. "Some of them forget they have kids."

Nationwide, about 5.7 percent of the U.S. population 12 and older has used methamphetamine at least once for non-medical purposes, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health -- and "past year" methamphetamine use was higher in the West (1.6 percent) than in the Northeast (0.3 percent), Midwest (0.5 percent) or South (0.7 percent).

In 2006, according to the survey, an estimated 731,000 people 12 and older in the U.S. were using methamphetamine.

Another nationwide study indicates that 1.8 percent of eighth graders, 2.8 percent of 10th graders and 3 percent of 12th graders reported using methamphetamine in 2007, compared to 2.7 percent, 3.2 percent and 4.4 percent, respectively, a year earlier.

Dr. Bruce Read, president of the Casa Serena board of directors, said research indicates that, like cocaine users, meth addicts take the drug not because it makes them feel good, but because they need to get over the lousy way they feel when the high wears off.

"It's a seductive drug," he said.

And women are using more than ever.

No matter who's using it, the medical effects of methamphetamine show up more quickly than other drugs, and the time it takes to get clean is much greater than with other drugs -- 18 months in many cases.

"It takes about a year to get off most drugs," Dr. Read said.

And because meth users typically become irritable as they progress through treatment, they take a toll on the people who provide treatment, said Dr. Read.

"A lot of places have to deal with staff burnout," he said. "They need time off."

Mrs. Capps said she feels for the people in the trenches against methamphetamine use and acknowledged that Washington could do more.

"We know that we have been asleep at the wheel," she said, noting the focus of much drug finding has been on the more traditional drugs.

She said she would work to get meth-related money to the counties in her district, and let policymakers at that level decide how best to spend it.

Craig Belknap, director of Casa Serena, said treatment has changed a great deal in the three decades he's been in "the business." In the early days, he noted, "it was just a bunch of old drunks sitting around smoking some funny stuff."

Recovery for meth users, he noted, is unlike that of any other drug user -- and women are especially in need.

"Casa Serena represents where the rubber meets the highway," Mr. Belknap said.

As for time, Dr. Read, the board president, said no one should be under the impression that life for a meth user is anything like the VH1 show "Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew," which bills itself as "the first television series to chronicle the dramatic, unscripted real-life experiences of a group of actual celebrities as they make the life-changing decision to enter themselves into a drug, alcohol and addiction treatment program with the sincere desire to achieve true rehabilitation and recovery."

"The 'Celebrity Rehab' model is where they go in for two weeks for treatment and go right back out to same world as before," he said.

"That model will never succeed."

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