

States High on Harsh Anti-Meth Ads

Are they powerful, or hyped?

By Erika Fitzpatrick

A graphic anti-methamphetamine ad campaign that features gory depictions of drug-addled teens, pocked with lesions and freebasing meth – is getting credit for reducing meth use in Montana and is being replicated by other states.

But some observers aren't so enthused, and they're taking a differ-

ent approach. campaign, with Arizona and Illinois seeking to duplicate the effort. The U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), whose own national anti-drug media efforts have produced a mixed record of success, in September announced that it was distributing ads donated by the Montana Meth Project, along with other resources, to the high-meth-use states of Washington, Alaska, California, Oregon, Iowa, Indiana,

sages. Scare tactics don't do that," said Vern Larson, coordinator of Utah's Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities state program and a member of the state's Methamphetamine Joint Task Force. "We lose our credibility in trying to work with kids when we [have] showed them something would happen and then it didn't happen," he said.

In September, Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. (R) launched a \$2 million End Meth Now campaign, a multimedia effort targeting young

donations now being invested in state expansion through the national Meth Project organization – it's clear that consensus on the best meth prevention approach is unlikely.

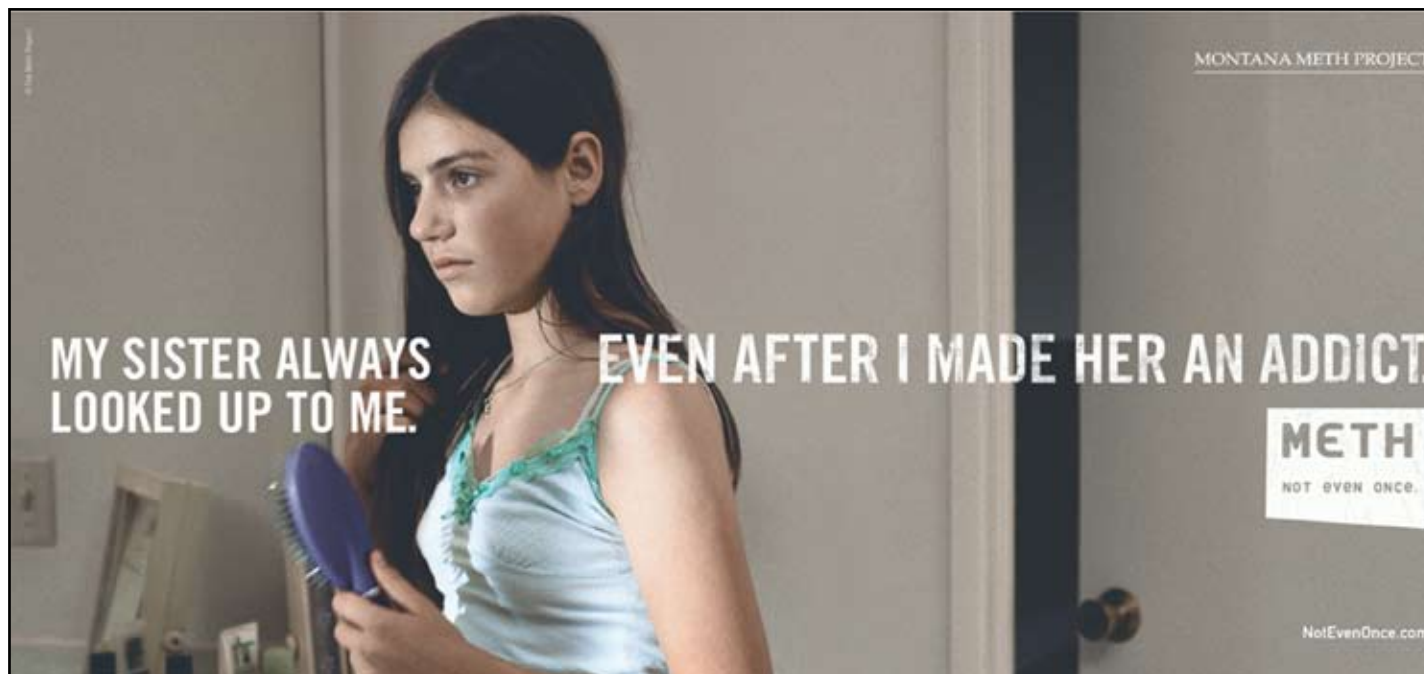
Even in Montana, there's ambivalence. Vicki Turner, director of the Prevention Resource Center, part of the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, said "it's worrisome" to dedicate millions of dollars to the single issue of methamphetamine, when the same data cited by state officials show that alcohol abuse is Montana's No. 1 youth drug problem.

The meth ads have begun a "wonderful conversation" about drug abuse in the state, Turner said, but she is concerned that kids, after being bombarded with the often gruesome ads, might find pot and booze "much more appealing" because their physical effects appear tame in comparison.

Peg Shea, executive director of the Montana Meth Project, said data show that the state hasn't seen "an increase in [other] drug use because of our ads." She said Montana teens say in focus groups that they want the anti-meth campaign to continue.

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ent approach.

The Montana Meth Project ads, launched and financed in 2005 by a wealthy businessman and rancher, have "played a very significant role in reducing meth use among Montana high school students," State Superintendent of Public Instruction Linda McCulloch said in a prepared statement in September.

Citing the 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) – conducted biennially by the state and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – McCulloch said reported use of meth among high schoolers in Montana had been dropping 15 percent every two years before the ads kicked in. After 18 months of exposure to the hard-hitting campaign, the rate of reported use of meth dropped by more than 45 percent.

That prompted Joe Lamson, McCulloch's communications director, to say "it's hard to deny" the ads' impact on youth meth use.

Other states are fast becoming hooked on the gritty, multimillion-dollar "Meth: Not Even Once" media

Illinois and Kentucky.

Founded and funded two years ago by part-time Montana resident Thomas Siebel – with donations of more than \$15 million from his foundation – the Meth Project is now a national nonprofit headquartered in California.

Doubts

But drug-prevention officials and harm-reduction advocates in nearby Utah find the Montana data untrustworthy, because it relies on teens' self-reported behavior rather than on hospital treatment admissions or other independent, verifiable information. The data also don't account for other prevention messages Montana youth might be getting or for outside factors that might account for the drop in reported use.

Others say the campaign ignores one lesson of prevention research: that frightening youth off drugs is ineffective and, worse, counterproductive.

"Part of good prevention is to give kids clear and consistent mes-

sages. Scare tactics don't do that," said Vern Larson, coordinator of Utah's Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities state program and a member of the state's Methamphetamine Joint Task Force. "We lose our credibility in trying to work with kids when we [have] showed them something would happen and then it didn't happen," he said.

In September, Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. (R) launched a \$2 million End Meth Now campaign, a multimedia effort targeting young

women and mothers. It provides facts about meth use and addiction and a 211 social services referral hot line, which in October received 39 meth-specific calls tied to the campaign, according to Liz Solis, program manager with the Utah Department of Human Resources.

The New Mexico Drug Policy Alliance plans to run a similar state-wide program with a \$500,000 U.S. Department of Justice earmark.

"The Montana Methamphetamine Project is like a hammer, and people see it and remember it – people who don't do drugs," said Luciano Colanna, executive director of the Harm Reduction Project and also a member of the Utah task force. But the ad campaign, he said, is "not the only intervention going on in Montana, so to say that that's the only type of informational drug awareness campaign that youth are being exposed to is absurd."

With the Montana congressional delegation seeking \$500,000 in 2008 for the Montana Meth Project – in addition to the millions of dollars in private and government

