

Meth use down, thanks to project

by *Don Stapley* - Nov. 15, 2008 12:00 AM
My Turn

Arizona has been hit with a lot of bad news recently: Foreclosures, plunging stocks, layoffs, recession and budget deficits.

You might have missed some very encouraging news just a few weeks ago. Methamphetamine use by Arizona's youth has declined steeply in the past two years, according to a survey by the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission.

That is not a misprint, folks. In fact, the recently released Arizona Youth Survey Report finds that meth use has been cut almost in half among students in the eighth, tenth and 12th grades. The rate of decline holds true in Maricopa County, too.

For the past decade, meth has been soaring locally and nationally as an equal-opportunity destroyer of lives, a social scourge and a key component in crime in the county, state and nation. More dangerous, more lethal and more addictive than practically any other substance, its effects are so destructive, so devastating, we have adopted a simple warning: "Meth: Not Even Once."

Let's check the connection between meth and crime. Fully 36 percent of inmates booked into county jails last year tested positive for methamphetamine, according to another study, this one compiled by Arizona State University. Female offenders arrested on drug charges were almost twice as likely to test positive for meth than male drug offenders. If it were not for their addictions, they could be law-abiding, contributing citizens. But not after their introduction to meth. Not even once.

This is why, three years ago, we declared war on meth, utilizing the Arizona Meth Project campaign strategy. Judging by the early results, the fight is going well.

Through my work with the National Association of Counties, I learned about a trailblazing anti-meth campaign in Montana, spearheaded by entrepreneur and philanthropist Tom Siebel. Meth use had reached epidemic levels in Montana in the early part of this decade, so Siebel started a foundation aimed at decreasing its abuse there. In Montana, a high-impact series of graphic ads starting in 2005 made a huge impact. Meth abuse plummeted. Arizona was the first state outside Montana to sign up for a similar project. And Maricopa County is the single largest contributor to the effort.

Look, I realize the meth ads are not the typical public-service announcements. There

are no elected officials faces or talking heads reading from a vanilla script warning teenagers of the dangers of drugs.

These ads are admittedly shocking.

I winced when I first saw "My Boyfriend," where a teenage girl is sobbing from the bed of a sleazy motel. A John hands some bills to a boy waiting outside. "I love my boyfriend," the girl says in a voiceover. "He takes care of me."

In another ad, "Junkie Den," a teen takes his first hit of meth. A group of wasted-looking companions, ugly, dirty, pockmarked, welcome him into their seamy street life of stealing and prostitution. "No," he says. "I'm trying it just this once." But they know better. They laugh. Meth: Not Even Once.

These ads aren't pretty. They're as subtle as a two-by-four. But they're working. Meth use is falling. That's why we need to sustain our early success, even in financially lean times.

Running the ads in prime time - when teens will see them - is not cheap. But the cost of a successful anti-meth campaign pales in comparison to the cost of dealing with meth addiction and the crime it causes. We must break the vicious cycle.

The writer, a Republican, is a Maricopa County Supervisor and president of the

National Association of Counties. To read more on the national meth crisis, go to www.naco.org.