

INDEPENDENT RECORD

February 16, 2009

Thousands March Against Meth

By: Alana Listoe

A sea of reddish-orange and blue descended upon the Capitol Monday as more than 2,300 students from across the state marched to send a message to lawmakers to increase funding for the Montana Meth Project. The energy was electric as the massive crowd made its way down side streets from Helena High School to the Capitol holding signs, wearing Montana Meth Project apparel and screaming as the Montana National's Guard helicopters escorted them overhead. Organizers started gathering signatures and scheduling the event more than six months ago, and students were bused in on 42 coaches from 72 Montana communities. Jayden Tripp and Haley McMahon, both Capital High School freshmen, said they came to the event on their Presidents Day off from school because they support the effort to increase awareness about the perils of meth use, particularly among teens. And, McMahon admitted, earning extra credit for English class didn't hurt. Tripp said she hasn't personally been exposed to meth and attributes the Montana Meth



Project's graphic advertising campaign for educating her about the drug's dangers. "The commercials scared me out of doing it," she said.

Jonathan Betchie, 16, was eager to join his peers in sending a united message about drug use.

"I don't believe in drugs in any way," the Capital High sophomore said. "I don't believe in putting that garbage into your body." Betchie said he knows two people who have used meth, and said the campaign's commercials and billboards help to warn others of the damage meth inflicts.

"They tell me the commercials

are basically word-for-word like it," he said. The governor's current budget proposal allocates \$500,000 per year for the next two years to the Montana Meth Project, which is still a collaboration of private and public funding. Yet organizers are hoping legislators increase that funding to \$2 million over two years, or \$1 million each year. The new funding would enable project leaders to extend the Meth Project, pinpointing Internet sites with their ads and seeking further federal matching grants, executive director Peg Shea has said. Software billionaire Tom Siebel started the Montana Meth Project in

September of 2005. The Siebel Foundation funded the project for the first couple of years, but the concept was to create a self-sustaining model with federal, state and private dollars. During the 2007 legislative session, the Montana Legislature earmarked \$1 million in tax money to aid the project. The Montana congressional delegation also has secured funding for the project, and private money has come from other sources. State Sen. Mike Cooney, D-Helena, said in these tough economic times it's important legislators make careful budgetary decisions, but says the message from Montana's young people was heard loud and clear. "Whenever the children of the state speak, we will listen," he said from behind a cubicle inside the Capitol. Organizers say it was the largest teen demonstration in Montana's history, and culminated in the delivery of petitions signed by more than 55,000 Montana residents requesting more financial support for the project. The petitions were accepted on the Capitol steps House Speaker Bob Bergren, D-Havre, and Senate President Bob Story, R-Park City. U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., was all smiles holding a March Against Meth sign and sporting a dark blue Montana Meth zip-up hoodie. "Years ago meth used to be cool," Baucus said while walking up Roberts Street. "Now it's cool to say no to meth." Montana Attorney

General Steve Bullock said drug use has a cost to society, and his office is supportive of putting more money into the budget to continue the fight against meth. A recent report by the Montana Attorney General's Office found that methamphetamine use costs the state more than \$200 million every year in criminal justice costs, treatment, child endangerment, unemployment and premature death. Those costs are down from a peak of \$300 million in 2005, when the Montana Meth Project launched. The report also found that, in the same period, teen meth use declined by 45 percent, and adults use declined more than 70 percent. "We cannot afford to pay the price of methamphetamine use any longer," Bullock said. "It's important that we reach out to the next generation and continue to educate our kids about the devastating consequences of meth." Dani Badgett and Angela Reinhardt, of Broadview, had a sleep-over last night in preparation for the event. The friends woke up at 5 a.m. Monday morning to board the bus at 6:30 a.m. to make the three-hour commute to Helena. It was the first time either had visited the Capitol. "It seemed like a fun experience, and something I wanted to promote," Badgett, 15, said. "It's an important issue." Reinhardt, 18, said the event was "life-changing." "It made me think about choices in life," the high school senior

said. Donalda Main, a fifth-grader from Great Falls, said she would never try meth. She said knows firsthand how life-threatening it can be because she knew a young person who died from using it. Roxanne Tymofichuk, a Helena resident and march volunteer, said she knows a lot of people who say the billboards and commercials are too graphic. "But it gets to them (young people)," she said. Tymofichuk said drug dealers do what they can to push it on kids and the community needs to do all it can to push back. "We are no longer passive," she said. "We need to be just as aggressive to get our message across." Tim Seery, 15, from Great Falls, said students from every corner of Montana used their collective voice to speak out against meth. "This is a proud day for Montana," he said.