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Georgia Meth Project: Graphic ads generate buzz

Program manager says Mexico is making cheaper, stronger meth

BY TIM CHITWOOD - tchitwood@ledger-enquirer.com

The ads don't always have the desired effect.

A volunteer attending a Georgia Meth Project program Tuesday at the Columbus Public Library recalled her 10-year-old's reaction to a radio ad in which an actor portraying an addict talked about beating up his brother to get money to buy drugs.

"Mommy, when will I be old enough to try meth?" the boy asked. To him it sounded like a Pepsi commercial, his mother said.

That's not the reaction the Meth Project hoped to provoke with its multi-million-dollar ad campaign graphically illustrating the horrors of methamphetamine, which is estimated to cost Georgia \$1.3 billion a year in medical care, social services, incarceration and law enforcement.

But 10-year-olds aren't the target audience, said Latrina Patrick, program manager for the nonprofit.



Latrina Patrick, program manager for the Georgia Meth Project, addresses a group of volunteers at the Columbus Public Library.

Patrick said the primary targets are those age 12-17; secondary are those 18-24. Parents make up the third group the campaign's intended to reach, she said.

To younger kids who don't grasp the ads' importance, parents must explain the context, she said.

Prime time

The ad campaign constitutes a considerable investment, consuming about 95 percent of the Meth Project's annual \$6 million budget. Each ad cost from \$400,000 to \$800,000 to produce, but that was a one-time cost because the same ads are used in each of the eight states now employing the campaign Montana inaugurated in 2005.

What eats up the money now is the air time. The Meth Project doesn't do public service announcements, which typically air late at night to a dwindling audience. It buys prime-time slots, so viewers see meth addiction explicitly depicted during commercial breaks in shows such as "Dancing With the Stars," "Desperate Housewives," "The Biggest Loser" and "Parks and Recreation."

Patrick said other nonprofits fighting drug abuse have noted the difference between public service announcements and purchased air time.

By September's end, the campaign will have bought about 16,300 TV ads, 15,800 radio ads, 100,000 print ads and 300 billboards.

Monochrome meth

Because the campaign template was molded out West, it's missing something, the absence of which some here in Georgia have noticed — ethnic diversity.

Tuesday's program at the library was for volunteers who want to help the Meth Project with local community programs. One of those volunteers was Stephanie Alexander-Green, who asked Patrick why all the people in the ads are white.

That's because of where the ads originated and were first used, Patrick said. In Montana, originally, and then in Idaho, Wyoming and Colorado, she said.

"Everyone looks like they're in Wyoming, Idaho," Patrick said.

And in a more ethnically diverse state like Georgia, that makes some residents think meth will never affect them.

"I've had people tell me flat-out: 'This is not my problem,'" Patrick said.

But the problem is going to spread, she said.

"Atlanta is a distribution hub for meth coming from Mexico, and the imported drug is getting cheaper and stronger. Anyone in the market for a cheaper, stronger high is likely to try it," Patrick said.

The Georgia Meth Project is now getting brochures that picture more racially diverse people, she said.

Come clean or die

Miranda Burlington said she's a former addict, and found the Meth Project ads reflective of her experience. "I lost everything I had," she said. To bankroll her addiction, she stole \$1,400 from her grandmother, and in just 21/2 months blew \$42,000 she was awarded after being injured in an on-the-job accident. She punched her mother three times during an altercation, she said.

She got clean in December 2006, after going to jail for 60 days. She reached a juncture at which she had but one choice — straighten up or die. "I couldn't stand myself anymore," she said.

Now she wants to keep others from suffering that.

Graeme Smith, a Columbus State University criminal justice major, said she had friends who had used meth. They beat their addiction, too, but sometimes still speak wistfully of the euphoria they felt on the drug.

"I hear them talk about meth as if it's an old flame that got away," she said.

Read more: <http://www.ledger-enquirer.com/2010/08/18/1234126/georgia-meth-project-graphic-meth.html#ixzz0x9rZWCvs>