

Georgia Meth Project kickoff draws large turnout

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Mar. 25--THOMASVILLE -- Young bodies and faces covered in sores. Hair falling out in clumps. Teeth crumbling.

Those are the outward physical signs of methamphetamine addiction.

Inside the brain, receptors are being destroyed rapidly by the highly addictive drug during a binge of a dozen days.

As a result of methamphetamine use, a teenage girl might lose her virginity in a filthy, public restroom or participate in humiliating sex in exchange for the drug.

Violent behavior, stealing and suicidal thoughts are common among meth addicts.

Close to 200 people attended a Wednesday meeting -- the first community kickoff for Atlanta-based Georgia Meth Project. Thomasville resident Richard Mooney is a member of the organization's advisory board.

The large audience at The Plaza Restaurant was made up of people from many sectors of the community: Education, elected officials, substance abuse counselors, business and professional people, social services, juvenile and justice personnel, judges, lawyers, law enforcement and firefighters, among others.

Sheriffs from five nearby counties also attended to learn more about the methamphetamine epidemic.

Sponsored by the Times-Enterprise and Archbold Northside Center for Behavioral and Psychiatric Care, the event was designed to make community leaders aware of a terrible drug infiltrating the area.

The drug costs Georgia \$1.3 billion annually in expenses ranging from missing days of work to incarceration, Jim Langford, Georgia Meth Project executive director, told the crowd.

Some 35 percent of Georgia teens and young people believe there is no risk in trying meth. "That is shocking," Langford said.

Some 23 percent of Georgia youths think methamphetamine will help them lose weight or concentrate on studies.

Langford said methamphetamine is four to five times stronger than crack cocaine in the dopamine effect on the brain.

"There's no teenager or adult tougher than this drug," he explained.

A meth high lasts four to 12 hours, while a crack coke high is for 30 to 45 minutes. Meth is snorted, smoked or injected.

Langford showed advertisements running on television and radio and appearing on billboards.

Although individuals in the television ads were actors, the graphic meth-related situations portrayed were real.

Teens who have actually been addicted to methamphetamine spoke in radio advertisements.

"There are no 80-year-old meth addicts. They all die," said one.

Another said he stole a motorcycle and ran the vehicle into a tree in an attempt to kill himself. The addict said he lost all his possessions within a month after beginning meth use.

"It's so scary to have months of your life gone from your brain," said an addict.

Another teen described hanging himself. "My dad found me. I guess he cut the rope," the boy said.

Meth addicts pick at and tear skin from their faces, resulting in bloody disfigurements that accompany body sores and skeletal bodies.

During a question-and-answer session, Langford said the Georgia source of methamphetamine ranges from meth labs in the back seats of cars to high-quality methamphetamine from Mexico.

"Atlanta is now the East Coast distribution hub for methamphetamine," he explained.

There is a perception that the drug is a problem only among whites. "It's moving into cities and into different ethnic groups," Langford said.

Thirty- and 40-year-old "soccer moms" use the drug to lose weight.

Langford said parents have a major influence on meth use. He encouraged parents to talk to their children about the drug.

"I've heard of kids putting it into chewing gum," he added.

Signs of Meth Use

--Staying awake for three to four days

--Sleeping for three to four days

--Sores on face and body

--Loss of appetite

--Weight loss

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