

No more 'Methingham'?

Anti-meth group in midst of media blitz to cut drug use



Effingham County Sheriff Jimmy McDuffie and Georgia Meth Project executive director Jim Langford talk before the start of Tuesday night's event.

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Autumn Whitfield hears the question every time she goes to represent her school at a function across the state.

When she tells others where she's from, "they go, 'oh, "Methingham,"'" the South Effingham High School senior said.

But Effingham Family Connection and Communities in Schools, along with the Georgia Meth Project, are trying to change that stigma. More than 100 Effingham residents came to Effingham County Middle School cafeteria Tuesday night to find out what the Georgia Meth Project can do to stem the tide of meth.

"That's what the campaign is about — unsell the drug and change some attitudes," said Jim Langford, the executive director of the Georgia Meth Project. "If we dry up the source and the need for it, we'll see a big change."

The Georgia Meth Project is beginning to air its first wave of television and radio spots. The stories behind them are intense and graphic, and the radio ads are based on and told by former meth users.

“These are not exaggerations,” Langford said. “There’s a whole bunch of people who don’t know how dangerous the drug is.”

The radio spots will run for a few weeks before going on hiatus and returning later this summer. The television ads were put together by some of Hollywood’s best, Langford said.

“These are probably the most effective commercials on meth that I’ve ever seen,” said Guyton Police Chief Randy Alexander. “Especially to the younger generation, I think it’s very effective. They look at a commercial like that, how graphic it is, and they say, ‘wow, that’s pretty bad.’”

Effingham County Sheriff Jimmy McDuffie is supportive of the push to eliminate meth usage, and he believes the ad campaign — particularly how vivid the depictions of the effects of meth use are — will help.

“We’ve tried very hard to combat our reputation as ‘Methingham,’” McDuffie said. “We think we’ve made a lot of inroads on the meth traffic here. But the key is getting them to stop using before they even start. I think the Georgia Meth Project is a step in that direction. These ads are pretty intense and graphic, but I think they need to be so people can really see just what meth does to them.”

Meth’s impacts

Langford served as a member of the state Board of Natural Resources and was an executive for Coca-Cola across the world. He was also state director of the Trust for Public Land.

When he returned home to Calhoun upon retirement, he found many old family farms were up for sale.

“I began to find out these families were falling apart because of methamphetamine,” he said. “I could not understand how this could happen to my little, innocent hometown.”

Langford also discovered that 75 percent of the children in the Calhoun area in foster care were there because of their parents’ involvement with meth.

Additionally, 42 percent of the state’s child endangerment cases involve meth, Georgia Meth Project findings showed, and 43 percent of federal convictions in the state are connected to meth.

“This drug is killing us,” Langford said. “It’s just killing us.”

According to statistics compiled by the Georgia Meth Project, meth abuse costs the state approximately \$1.3 billion a year.

Changing attitudes on meth is one step, and a big one at that, Langford noted. A Georgia Meth Project poll among the state's high schoolers showed that 35 percent of Georgia teens see little to no risk in trying meth, and one in five say meth is easy to get.

"I hear a lot of people talking about it," Whitfield said. "It's a really bad drug."

Dangerous stuff in meth

Meth makers will use lithium out of batteries, the red strips out of matches and even coffee filters to make meth, along with such items as anhydrous ammonia, ether, nail polish remover, lye, hydrochloric acid, sulfuric acid and brake fluid — almost all of which are toxic.

It's easy to make but there are tell-tale signs of meth manufacturing. It has a very strong, pungent odor that will burn eyes and nasal cavities.

Meth is also easy to distribute. It's been put in chewing gum, coffee, soft drinks and laced into marijuana. It can be smoked or injected into the bloodstream and is more addictive than heroin, according to the Georgia Meth Project.

"Right now, it's the drug of choice, for the availability, the price, the quality of it and the high they give once they get it," Alexander said. "It's a very easy drug to obtain."

Because of the chemicals used in meth, a meth user's appearance can change drastically in a very rapid fashion. It can result in paranoia, anxiety, confusion, insomnia, hallucinations and violent behavior. A meth user on a high can stay awake for days and then crash for several days once the high has subsided.

Rapid weight loss and tooth decay can accompany even mild levels of meth usage.

"You've got to put your kids on alert," Langford said. "Watch out for who they're hanging out with."

Calhoun police officers told Langford they watched a suspect go into a store and assemble the products to make meth in 13 minutes and it cost about \$85.

"There's a lot of smaller labs and they're not as easy to find," he said. "They're everywhere, and these guys are busting them every day."

Georgia has become the East Coast hub for meth distribution, Langford said. Atlanta is a distribution center for meth being manufactured in Mexico and shipped in tractor-trailer loads.

"What we have to do is work on the prevention side," he said.

Langford said there are many issues with meth the initiative doesn't address, such as targeting meth makers and providing help for meth users.

“We wish we could,” he said. “We want to celebrate all those people who are fighting their addiction. But we are not a treatment organization. We are a prevention campaign. We want to prevent someone from trying that drug just one time.”

The Georgia Meth Project’s slogan is “Not Even Once,” and Langford is hopeful that curtailing the demand for meth will have an impact on meth suppliers and chase them out of business.

“If we can knock that down, we hope we can knock these dealers down,” he said, “and then the law enforcement guys can really get to work.”