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Dalton youth serve in anti-meth campaign

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By **Charles Oliver**

The teen's eyes stare at you from the photograph — bloodshot and vacant over lips that are scabbed and peeling.

“Actually, doing meth won't make it easier to hook up,” reads the caption.

That image and many others like it are part of a controversial advertising campaign aimed at deterring methamphetamine use among teenagers. First launched in Montana four years ago by the Montana Meth Project, the ads have spread to several other states. Next year, the nonprofit Georgia Meth Project will bring the ads to this state.

“After these start to run, there may be people who will say, ‘Is the drug problem really that bad that we have to run these kinds of ads?’ and you'll have law enforcement, health care professionals and former addicts who'll say ‘The problem is that bad. This is not an exaggeration. This is something that everybody needs to pay attention to,’” said Jim Langford, executive director of the Georgia Meth Project.

Langford said the ads will launch in the first quarter of 2010, as early as January if all goes according to plan.

“It is a proven campaign. It has TV, radio, billboards. It has a community involvement component. It's a prevention campaign. It's a huge marketing campaign,” Langford said. “The radio ads are real kids telling real stories, their own personal stories. We found that a school administrator or another adult standing in front of a bunch of kids doesn't have a very big effect. If you have stories that are believable and you have kids telling other kids about these drugs, it seems to have a very strong effect.”

He believes the ads will have a strong impact.

“These are not going to be ads running late at night when nobody is watching. They'll run in the afternoons when kids are watching TV and at night when adults and kids are watching,” he said.

Businessman Lee Shaw said the Georgia Meth Project got under way last year, when Georgia Attorney General Thurbert Baker invited him and other business leaders to discuss the meth problem in Georgia. At that meeting, they heard from Tom Siebel, who had helped create the Montana Meth Project.

“I saw what a large problem it is in Georgia, and North Georgia, where I'm from originally, had one of the worst problems in the state of Georgia,” Shaw said. “We had the problem identified. We had the solution to the problem identified. We just needed to get someone to take the initiative.”

The Montana Meth Project claims that teen meth use has dropped by 63 percent since the ad campaign started there, that adult meth use has dropped 73 percent, and that meth-related crime has dropped 62 percent.

Critics note that teen meth use in the state had been falling for six years before the campaign started. And a study published last year in the peer-reviewed journal *Prevention Science* found that the Montana Meth Project's own data suggest that prolonged exposure to the ads may lead teens to believe meth use is acceptable and not dangerous.

The 1936 film "Reefer Madness" was rediscovered in the 1970s and became an unintentional comedy hit among young people because of the way it exaggerated the harm from marijuana use. Langford said the meth project ads will not meet a similar fate.

"That will not be the case this time. They were so careful the way they pulled these professionals together. They wanted to make the ads very realistic in terms of how the drug is used, very realistic about how it affects kids and parents, so nobody can say that 'That's not real. That's not how the drug is used. That's not really the effects of this drug.' They were very careful about that," he said. "This drug is truly unlike anything anybody has ever seen. The chemical effects on the body, it's hard to over emphasize how destructive it is on the body, on the mind and on lives. Methamphetamine is five times more powerful than crack cocaine. It's a very, very destructive drug."

Ann Davies, director of treatment services at Highland Rivers, agrees.

"It's a very addictive drug. We're seeing folks who have really lost everything, their health and their families, and it's very difficult. It's a very difficult drug for our consumers to stay away from unless there is involvement from the legal (aspect)," she said.

Langford said Georgia has the third highest rate of teen meth use in the nation, and he cites a study by Rand which found meth costs Georgia \$1.3 billion each year in health care costs, crime, lost productivity and other costs. And he says North Georgia has some of the worst meth problems in the state.

Local experts agree the meth problem is bad here, but some say they see signs of improvement.

"We're seeing people (meth addicts) but it's been a lot less than a few years ago when they cracked down on the availability of pseudoephedrine," said Gary Tester, coordinator of outpatient services for the Westcott Center at Hamilton Medical Center. "But the people who manufacture meth have found a new way to make it so we might see an increase."

Lamar Long, interim director of the Whitfield County Department of Family and Children Services (DFACS), also said he believes the meth problem is getting better and officials are seeing fewer referrals for the drug. He said laws making it harder to buy over-the-counter drugs with pseudoephedrine have helped, and he

adds the Georgia Meth Project will also help.

But Dr. William Pullen, medical director of the Emergency Department at Hamilton Medical Center, said the emergency room hasn't seen a change in the number of meth users admitted.

“It has been pretty consistent over the last several years,” he said.

The Dalton Daily Citizen also ran three other articles on meth today. One article talks with a meth user while another discusses meth and its impact in Murray County. They can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

A third article on how to find help for addicts can be found [here](#).

For more information on the Georgia Meth Project, go to www.georgiamethproject.org. To see some of the Meth Project ads, go to methproject.org.

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