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Georgia Meth Project takes aim at abuse among young people

by John M. Willis, Editor/Publisher

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Meth abuse costs Georgia \$1.3 billion a year, but Jim Langford, executive director of the Georgia Meth Project, said an aggressive public awareness campaign will soon be aimed at reducing first-time methamphetamine use in the state.

Langford, speaking this week at a public forum sponsored by Citizens Against Meth (CAM), said the graphic advertising campaign will begin in January.

The Georgia Meth Project plans to spend \$6 million to fund the campaign, all of which will be raised through private donations, Langford said. So far, about half of the needed funds have been raised.

Langford was one of several community resources on the meth problem who spoke at the CAM forum, which was organized to kickoff National Recovery Month, said Latrina Patrick, CAM's executive director.

Also speaking were Dr. John Bledsoe, president of Calhoun Counseling Center, Melissa Knight, director of the Cherokee Judicial Circuit Drug Court, Beth Bowen and James Cato, two recovering addicts, Sgt. Jay Marquez, of the Calhoun Police Department, Chief Deputy Robert Paris of the Gordon County Sheriff's Office and Catherine Schueman, of Highland Rivers.

Langford said the campaign will focus on preventing meth use among the state's most vulnerable population, its young people.

According to the Department of Health, 51 percent of people entering treatment for meth abuse in Georgia are between the ages of 12 and 25, substantially higher than the national average, and Georgia is third in the nation in total number of meth users between the ages of 12 and 17.

In 2007, 32 percent of federal drug offenses in Georgia involved meth, according to the Office of National Drug Control Policy. Langford said Northwest Georgia had some of the highest incidences of meth use in the state of Georgia.

Langford said the Georgia Meth Project is based on similar programs in Montana and Arizona, the first two states to launch Meth Project prevention campaigns. Those states saw 45 percent reductions in teen meth use in two years, he said.

"Montana saw a 72 percent reduction in first-time meth use," he said. While the program has been started successfully in other western states, Georgia is the first southeastern state to use the program, he said.

"We all have been impacted — directly or indirectly — by substance abuse," Patrick said. "It's important to remember that you are not alone. We want to show people that it is not hopeless."

CAM was founded in 2005 as a grassroots organization of Gordon Countians whose lives had been affected by meth abuse.

“We have a terrible problem with meth in Gordon County and we need to do something about it,” said Bledsoe, who was involved in the founding of CAM and continues to serve on its board.

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