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Methamphetamine: Solutions and hope

By Wil Morat
Staff Writer

Editor's Note: This is the last in a four-part series examining the methamphetamine epidemic.

"Freddie" waited alone in a Diamond Springs dentist's office one early morning to have several decayed and neglected teeth pulled. The 53-year-old El Dorado County resident was already missing some teeth, and he figured to have the rest pulled over the next couple of visits and get fitted with dentures.

Now clean for 20 years, a long stint as a drug user — including methamphetamine — contributed to his poor dental health. The high acidity of meth typically causes severe tooth decay.

"[The meth use] started when I was playing football in high school. It started with coke ... other players were doing it. It was kind of a way to enhance my potential, but it actually kind of scattered my thinking," he said.

The drug use increased beyond the playing field and soon his schoolwork began to suffer. Freddie was kicked off the football team.

"It kind of spiraled down from there," he said. "I wanted to relive

that [period of my life]. I was always chasing that first high ... you can never get that back."

Freddie used meth for years, and said eventually he tried heroin in order to "come down from a two-

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Photo courtesy of EDC Public Health Dept.

EDC SENIOR PROBATION Officer Larry Cantwell, left, receives a statewide award — typically reserved for people in the drug and alcohol rehabilitation field — at a recent ceremony. Joe Arsenith, right, of the EDC Public Health Department nominated Cantwell because of his work with Prop 36 participants.

or three-day high from speed." He ended up spending years living on the streets.

"Generally how users jump over [to heroin] is trying to come down from the meth. It gets to be a vicious cycle, and that's when you're just wasting your life."

Methamphetamine has plagued the western U.S. over the last 20 years. Made with multiple toxic substances, the euphoria-inducing drug leads to serious and even deadly health problems, and creates a severe addiction that is one of the hardest to beat.

California has become the source of massive meth production over the last ten years, and the drug has begun to spread east, reaching most states except the northeast seaboard. Primarily used by rural, low-income whites — though not exclusively — the drug is now more widely used than cocaine and heroin combined.

A drastic rise in the number of meth cases received by the EDC District Attorney's office over the last five years is indicative of the popularity of the drug here in El Dorado County, and most statistics point to a tight correlation between meth and crime.

As many parents succumb to the ill effects of serious meth addiction, children inevitably find themselves neglected, abandoned,

mistreated and malnourished, putting a strain on the county social services charged with helping to rehabilitate families.

Getting help works

Despite the tremendous and sometimes permanent physical and psychological effects of meth abuse, treatment facilities exist that can successfully rehabilitate meth users.

In EDC there is no shortage of devoted, passionate and strong professionals in the private and public spheres who have made it their mission to fight back against the meth epidemic.

However, financial restraints on both private and county services hinder potential progress, while social stigmas alienate recovering users who need to be reintegrated into daily life.

The Gates Recovery Foundation in Placerville provides not only a detoxification facility for those first few critical days of rehabilitation, but also the necessary counseling and treatment needed over the following months to prepare recovering addicts for the rest of their lives.

The administrative manager at Gates, Peter Stressenger, alluded to the community effort needed to fight the spread of meth.

"People don't understand that

the person using and the person recovering are different. They lump them together as drug users," he said.

Transitional housing for recovering addicts going through those rough first few months is always in short supply, and finding homes that can be used can be a problem because of neighbors' fears.

"You need a permit for [transitional] houses. Everyone has the same attitude, 'Oh yeah, we need that but not in my back yard,'" Stressenger said.

His coworker Pete Nielsen, the detoxification and counseling services program manager, said while private donations provide much of the funding for their facility, it's never enough.

"We're here about helping people. If money was an issue we would have folded up long ago," he said.

The success that many rehabilitation facilities have developed over the years has inspired many on the law enforcement side of the fight against meth to integrate recovery into the courts.

A new battle plan

Proposition 36 was passed by California voters in 2000, and is now beginning to have a huge impact on helping meth addicts

fight back and retake control of their lives. The law provided an approach to non-violent drug offenders by suspending a jail sentence in exchange for 12 months of treatment.

Larry Cantwell is the senior probation officer in the county and works closely with meth users who have entered the Prop 36 program.

"We as probation officers see that sending non-violent drug offenders to jail or prison ... they tended to come out either a little more or a lot more violent," he said. "[Prop 36 provides] ongoing monitoring, sanctions and rewards, increasing probation supervision and increased drug testing. Because of these four elements we've seen remarkable success."

Most people in the field agreed that initially many people saw Prop 36 as a "get-out-of-jail-free card," but that has changed as the program has evolved. Cantwell said the program is demanding of participants, but if they complete it, they can turn their lives around.

"We don't look for perfection, we look for progress along the way. People will either do treatment or do time. The people that engage in treatment, their lives

are significantly changed," he said.

Again, funding has put some restraints on Prop 36's ability to succeed. The initial funding expires on June 30, 2006, though the California legislature is currently considering a bill that would extend the program for one more year.

An extension, of sorts, from Prop 36 is drug court. Initially tried in Florida in 1989, the idea began locally in August 2005.

EDC Superior Court Judge Douglas Phimister said drug cases were taking up so much time he thought the drug court could provide better results. Non-violent drug offenders undergo a treatment program with regular appearances in court in front of Judge Phimister.

In drug court everyone's successes and failures are shared. The group atmosphere creates a sense of teamwork amongst the recovering users, allowing them to share their strength.

Judge Phimister is the lynchpin of the program, making time in his calendar for the drug court because he has seen the results.

"We found we could create accountability," Phimister said. "The secret to succeeding in our program is to keep appointments,

be on time and make changes in your lifestyles and habits. If you need help, ask for help."

EDC Public Health Department Alcohol & Drug Program division manager Joe Arsenith said drug court has already produced dramatic results.

"Drug court is a way to recognize successes, and give [recovering users] motivation to keep going," he said. "It uses the power of the peers, straight talk. There's no BS in that courtroom."

However, Arsenith said state money for Prop 36 only provides treatment to about 10 or 15 percent of drug offenders.

At the Gates Recovery Foundation, Pete Nielsen agrees that the demonstrated success of Prop 36 and drug court should be expanded, and that public money should be spent on treatment rather than incarceration.

"If we don't start putting money into county human services now, once we really have the problems, we'll have to play catch up," he said. "If we start now we have a chance to keep El Dorado County great."

E-mail Wil at wmorat@vil-lagelife.com.