

Meth town hall is well-attended

Organizers seek to confront "the devil's drug"

E. Royal Emerson | Staff writer

SIREN - On the evening of Wednesday, June 8, approximately 180 people gathered in the auditorium of the Siren High School to discuss the demon grip of methamphetamine addiction and the impact it is having upon our communities.

The meth town hall was sponsored by the Restorative Justice Center and included informational booths and testimonies from law enforcement, social services and the previously addicted.

"Methamphetamine is the devil's drug," said Burnett County Sheriff Ron Wilhelm as he discussed the transformation that occurs as a result of methamphetamine addiction. Prior to Wilhelm taking the stage, photos flashed upon a large movie screen. The photos were before-and-after shots, showing the drastic physical transformation that takes place once one becomes addicted to methamphetamine. Faces that were once vibrant and hopeful became wane and gray, some with scabs and missing teeth, all looking to have aged greatly, even though most had only been addicted for one or two years.

The number of those bowed down to methamphetamine addiction is growing. According to Wilhelm, there has been a 1,363-percent increase in the amount of methamphetamine seized in Burnett County since 2014 and a 48-percent increase in meth arrests.

Darren Cox, AODA and mental health therapist with Aurora Community counseling, described methamphetamine as "an equal-opportunity destroyer." Agreeing with Wilhelm's portrayal of methamphetamine as the devil's drug, Cox explained the downward spiral of meth addiction, describing addicts as "self-focused individuals on the path to destruction."

Cox showed a slide of brain scan imaging highlighting how methamphetamine short-circuits the brain by altering the brain's neurotransmitters. One hit of meth triggers a dopamine surge into that area of the brain stimulated by pleasure and immediate gratification. The brain's pleasure principal becomes so overwhelmed that soon it is only through meth that one can feel joy.

The theme of the meth town hall is Choose Life over Meth. Too often, organizers say, the choices we make lead to the bondage of addiction or other base desires. When dealing with the devil's drug of methamphetamine, according to Wilhelm and Cox, the bondage is all the more enslaving, because the drug alters the chemistry within one's mind. Liberation can come only with a deliberative and conscious effort to break free.

According to Cox, 14 months after discontinuing meth use, the brain's short-circuiting remains. Cox described meth as "a substance so powerful it can even short-circuit the maternal function." The amount of child abuse and neglect cases has increased 358 percent since 2011. "Methamphetamine addiction is robbing our kids of their parents," Cox said.

Crossing the Mexican border

Wilhelm showed a slide from the U.S. Department of Justice titled "Methamphetamine Transportation Routes" showing a meth distribution network originating in Mexico and spanning out to markets all across the United States.

According to Wilhelm, more than 80 percent of meth consumed in the United States is produced in super labs in Mexico, flooding the U.S. market through "a mostly open border" and a sophisticated and well-organized distribution network organized by Mexican drug cartels.

A former meth addict, who recently graduated from the drug court treatment process, and speaking of his experiences, stated, "there are some hard-core criminals bringing drugs into our communities that nobody sees."

During a panel discussion, sheriff's Detective Tracy Finch described "a local Siren girl who got caught up with the drug cartels." The young woman, according to Finch, "would drive around with two cell phones Velcro taped to her steering wheel," so she could take delivery orders. The woman, now serving a prison sentence, distributed meth to dealers in Burnett, Polk counties and Pine County, Minn. Within this rural three-county area, the woman was responsible for distributing 1,000 pounds of meth annually. Finch also described the recent arrest and imprisonment of Jerry Vang, a major drug-cartel-linked meth distributor from California who had taken up residence in a motel in Siren.

"Methamphetamine is here," Finch said. "And it is here in a big way."

Wilhelm encouraged the community to adopt an "if you see something, say something" approach, encouraging people to contact law enforcement if they see suspicious activity.

Developing a battle plan

Joe Wasak, a board member with Restorative Justice, described the goal of the meth town hall as "the beginning of developing an action plan to eradicate this horrible drug from our society."



Byron Hopke Burnett County Health and Human Services AODA Coordinator, behavioral health department, spoke to the crowd at the meth town hall meeting held at the Siren School on Wednesday, June 8.

Toward that end, Byron Hopke, director of the Burnett County Behavioral Health unit at HHS, described an action plan to include educational billboards, yard signs, community outreach, informational booths at county fairs and establishment of a meth diversion program.

"It's a good first step to get the community awareness going," said Michael Decorah, intergovernmental affairs specialist with the St. Croix Chippewa Indians. "A lot of these guys run to the reservation thinking they can hide," Decorah said. "We all need to work together to clean this up and get it out from our communities."

The St. Croix Chippewa were well-represented at the event, including staff affiliated with tribal health and human services.

"Meth is turning good people into bad," Decorah said. "It's not your relative that's doing it to you, it's the addiction. When that addiction trigger happens, eventually you become a criminal."

The most riveting moment of the evening was a presentation by a woman who had been addicted to meth for three years. She described how the initial euphoria for the drug turned into a nightmare. Within one year of becoming addicted to meth, she lost her home and car. After a friend of hers had died of a drug overdose, and facing prison time, she entered the drug court treatment process. She has been sober now for two years. The crowd gave her a standing ovation.

She decided to tell her story, she said, "to face the fears of what I have become."



Tammy Hopke, program coordinator for Restorative Justice of Northwest Wisconsin, Joe Wacek, vice president of the RJNW board and Brandy Horstman, executive director of RJNW. RJNW sponsored the meth town hall meeting.



Photos courtesy Restorative Justice of Northwest Wisconsin

Approximately 180 people gathered in the auditorium of the Siren High School to discuss the impact that methamphetamine addiction has on the local community. The event was sponsored by the Restorative Justice Center and included informational booths and testimonies from law enforcement, social services and the previously addicted.

BELOW: The question and answer panel included local and state officials and representatives, along with experts in the field of meth addiction.

