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opinion

The high cost of meth in Colorado

By John W. Suthers

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During my 30-year legal career, including stints as a District Attorney, U.S. Attorney, and now, as Attorney General, I've seen various illicit drugs adversely impact the lives of Coloradans.

Throughout the 80s and early 90s, cocaine was the drug of choice. Marijuana use has been a constant. Heroin has been a significant problem in some urban sectors of our state.

But in the course of my career, I have not seen a drug scourge as pernicious as methamphetamine. It is a highly addictive drug that interferes with normal societal function in drastic ways.

Meth began to take hold in our communities during the late 1980s, reaching epidemic proportions in the last decade. And because of our disproportionately young and transient population, the State of Colorado has felt the effects more than many other states.

Earlier this week, the RAND Drug Policy Research

Center released a report that showed just how serious the problem has become.

According to the study, the United States suffers more than \$23 billion in direct and indirect economic damages each year because of methamphetamine abuse. Estimates put Colorado's share of that number as high as \$1.4 billion, including \$73,000 for each dependent user.

Colorado ranks eighth in the nation in the per capita rate of meth use. Meth-related property and violent crimes increased nearly twofold in Colorado between 2000 and 2005.

The RAND study estimates that \$4.2 billion is spent annually to pay for meth-related crime and criminal justice intervention.

Costs of family dysfunction and resulting social services due to meth use are estimated at \$900 million per year.

Drug treatment and hospital care for meth addicts costs another \$700 million annually. And loss of workplace productivity takes another \$650 million per year from the United States economy.

It's fairly common knowledge that Colorado ranks among the top six states for identity theft, but what many people don't realize is that fully two-thirds of those crimes are committed by meth users.

The RAND study found that meth represents a 50

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percent higher economic burden on society than prevalence rates suggest, meaning that meth use creates societal costs proportionately much higher than other illicit drugs.

Fortunately, the Colorado legislature had the foresight to create the Colorado Methamphetamine Task Force, which I have chaired since its inception in 2006. The Task Force consists of 24 highly dedicated professionals who bring a great deal of expertise to the table.

Over the last three years, we have worked to construct a blueprint to attack the problem, attracting government and private funding for successful treatment programs and increasing awareness about the dangers of meth throughout the state.

We've made considerable progress, but as the RAND study shows, there still is much work to be done. That's why the Task Force will ask the legislature this year to extend its mission beyond the scheduled sunset in 2010.


I've observed the tremendous work that law enforcement, the medical community, and nonprofits are doing to combat the impact of meth in Colorado.

Working in partnership with the Colorado Alliance for Drug Endangered Children and other agencies, the Task Force has made great progress in leading the fight against this epidemic.

It is my sincere hope that Colorado will continue to make this effort a priority and allocate appropriate resources to the effort.

John W. Suthers is Attorney General of Colorado. He lives in Littleton.

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Colorado 8th in methamphetamine use

The drug costs the state about \$1.4 billion a year and triggers other crimes, a report says.

By Mike McPhee
The Denver Post

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Evidence from a meth lab bust. (The Denver Post)

Colorado ranks eighth in the nation in per-capita methamphetamine use, costing the state roughly \$1.4 billion a year, said Attorney General John Suthers on Wednesday.

A new national study of the social costs associated with methamphetamine calculates that meth abuse nationwide costs the country \$23.4 billion a year, or roughly \$73,700 per user.

Costs include treatment and hospitalization of abusers, social programs caring for their children and families, law enforcement and finally the lost productivity caused by the drug, which is relatively cheap, highly addictive and long-lasting, sometimes producing a high for 24 hours.

"Abuse of methamphetamine brings a whole host of problems with it, particularly crimes such as burglaries

Extras


View a slide show of images released by authorities depicting the ravages of meth .

and ID thefts," Suthers said. "In Colorado, roughly two-thirds of all ID thefts are caused by methamphetamine users. Colorado ranks sixth in the country for ID theft."

A significant number of abused children are removed from their homes because of their parents' use of methamphetamine, he said.

In fact, 70 percent of all child-abuse cases involve drug abuse, said Lori Moriarity, former head of the North Metro Drug Task Force and now executive director of the National Alliance for Drug-Endangered Children.

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"The bottom line is that Colorado has a huge problem with the scourge of methamphetamine," Suthers said.

Suthers and Moriarity said Colorado has a disproportionate number of meth abusers, primarily because of the state's proximity to the supply routes coming up from Mexico. He said Wyoming and Arizona rank high for that same reason, adding that Colorado has more total meth users than the state of New York.

Another reason for high meth use is that Colorado has a young and fairly transient population, including seasonal ski-resort workers and oil-field workers, he said.

A majority of meth users live in rural areas and half of the users are women, Suthers said. Women account for only 25 percent of abusers of other drugs, such as cocaine or marijuana, he said.

Meth abusers frequently resort to stealing credit cards and numbers or stealing checks from mail boxes. Frequently, checks can be washed clean and rewritten, or reproduced inexpensively.

"Meth users frequently drive our streets looking for mail," Moriarity said.

One gang of meth addicts stole a U.S. Postal Service blue drop box and moved it to different locations every few days.

Suthers and Moriarity said meth is now being produced in large super labs instead of motel


rooms or farmhouses. Colorado shut down 151 meth labs in 2005 and only 46 in 2007.

Ingredients for making meth, such as ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, are still available to the public in cold medicines, although they have been moved behind pharmacy counters to restrict the number of packages that can be bought by a single person.

The study was done by the RAND Drug Policy Research Center.

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