

Susan M. Holden - Press

Meth: Helping kids avoid fatal mistakes

by Susan Holden, February 05, 2006

If this plan works, every minute of every meeting I have ever attended will have been worth it. There has been no region of our state unaffected by meth - methamphetamine - the new drug of choice among our youth. And there has been no place that I have been in our state where lawyers did not want to be involved in a solution.

It therefore seemed obvious to enlist the MSBA Criminal Law Section to help the MSBA develop an educational program about meth aimed at middle school- and high school-aged students and recruit lawyers and judges around the state to deliver the program through their community schools. The goal of this program is to quell demand for the drug among young people through education and, hopefully, to save at least one life.

We will not likely ever know if the plan achieved its goal (and you'll thus be left to wonder if my time was well-spent in all of those meetings). But at a minimum this effort will provide an opportunity for MSBA members to get involved in service to their communities and to demonstrate the positive impact the legal profession can make.

SCOPE OF PROBLEM

Why is it needed? All one must do is look at the frightening facts and figures about meth and the drain it has caused on the resources of our court system. Since 1999, the courts have tracked statewide the number of methamphetamine-related criminal cases filed. The most current annual statistics, those reported for the year 2004, reveal the onrush of a tidal wave of meth in our communities. The number of possession offenses filed each year increased from a level of 309 cases in 1999 up to 2,979 cases in 2004. That's an increase of 896 percent and gives us a glimpse of the demand side of this equation. Cases filed involving the sale of meth similarly increased nearly 900 percent from 36 cases in 1999 to a high of 385 in 2002 and the number of cases was still over 300 in 2004. Meth charges made up 6.9 percent of all drug charges in 1999 but increased to 39.4 percent in 2004.

There is some good news in this battle. As the problem of meth labs grew exponentially around the state, Minnesota lawmakers sought to put a stop to the costly clean up of the labs and to eliminate some of the supply of this highly addictive drug. Effective July 1, 2005, over-the-counter cold and allergy medicines that contain pseudoephedrine must be secure behind pharmacy counters, sold only to those over 18 years old, and limited to two packages per customer. This law limits the availability of one key ingredient used to make crystal meth and is credited with significantly reducing the numbers of labs in Minnesota. Fewer labs with the accompanying toxic, hazardous substances means local governments are saving thousands of dollars in clean up costs alone.

Despite this law, however, meth remains a significant problem in Minnesota. Law enforcement officials estimate that 80 percent of meth in Minnesota comes from Mexico. The new law did not have any effect on reducing the demand for this drug. Two studies released in January 2006 by the National Association of Counties (NACO) show that Minnesota's experience with meth is not atypical. NACO concludes that meth abuse is the top drug problem facing counties in America. Across the nation, hospital emergency rooms are reporting that meth-related admissions have increased significantly in the last five years and, according to a January 18 report on the NACO Web site, meth is now the number-one drug resulting in emergency room visits. The unique difficulties in treating the addiction and the increased resources needed for appropriate treatment are all increasing the cost to our communities of this drug.

LAWYERS CAN HELP

How can we help? Peter Orput, chair of the MSBA's Criminal Law Section, has coordinated the section's work on this project. This program can be a real benefit to schools in educating students on the dangers of meth addiction, its related health problems, the difficulty with treatment, and the legal consequences. Lawyers I've met have voiced enthusiastic support for such a program since meth has become such a drain on court and community resources and poses such a hazard to our children. Members of the County Attorneys Association, the State Public Defenders, the MSBA's New Lawyers Section, and the judiciary have expressed interest in collaborating on this project.

I envision this program to include presentations in middle schools as well as high schools. It could be expanded for parental education as well as interested community groups. It would be available for first showing by this spring, and offered as broadly as possible by the fall of 2006. Lawyers from around the state would present the program in their local communities, in cooperation with local judges and law enforcement. The Criminal Law Section is working with educators in middle schools and high schools who will assist in developing the presentations to be most effective or appropriate for the two age groups.

Lawyers who practice in the areas of criminal law, juvenile law, and child protection have already seen the effects of this drug. These practitioners have stories to tell about meth that students likely will find interesting and, I hope, instructive. If education can reduce demand for this drug, here is a potent opportunity for lawyers to make a positive difference in their local schools and communities.