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Fighting back against meth

Methamphetamine users sent to Sonoma County treatment programs in increasing numbers

By JEREMY HAY

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Methamphetamine abuse is sending people into Sonoma County's treatment programs at a faster rate than any other drug, pushing into plainer sight the rising social costs of a drug long entrenched on the North Coast.

"It is the primary drug we're dealing with," said Gino Giannavola, director of Sonoma County's Alcohol and Other Drug Services division, where the influx of methamphetamine-related treatment cases has nearly doubled since 2000.

METH FACTS

Why the drug methamphetamine is so addicting, who is using it and how to get help / A14

The surge of people battling a cheap, highly addictive drug that can cause a brutal array of physical and mental damage has spotlighted the question of how well drug treatment works and whether it can drive down drug-related crime rates.

"It's very urgent," said Sonoma County Superior Court Judge Robert Boyd, who presides over most of the county's drug-related cases.

"Until we get a handle on this and get people into good treatment, it's going to continue to get worse," he said. "Meth's a horrible drug . . . the most dangerous drug we have now."

On one day — Aug. 11 — meth was the primary drug for 438 of 1,328 people in the county treatment system. An additional 141 were on the waiting list for treatment, most of them in the county jail.

Charlie Walker is one who has made it into treatment.

Walker is 24, with an easy smile and big, dark eyes. "Hellion" is tattooed in Old English script on his left forearm, and on his right, "Living."

He is in a six-month residential treatment plan at Casa Calmecac, a recovery program based in a rambling, Craftsman-style house on Dutton Avenue in Santa Rosa.

Drug-free since June 27, he can't help but smile recalling his first snort of methamphetamine. He was 14, in a Yulupa Avenue apartment where he'd gone to buy marijuana. It was 10 years ago, well into the rock-

TURN TO **METH**, BACK PAGE



KENT PORTER / The Press Democrat

Charlie Walker, 24, is in a court-ordered recovery program in Santa Rosa because of his methamphetamine use. He has been drug-free since June 27 and says he plans to stay that way. "I know it's a matter of life or death."

Moms work to mend in face of addiction



CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / The Press Democrat

Tonia Brinson helps her son Justice, 1, learn to walk as her oldest daughter, Tashawna Sloan, watches at home in Windsor last week. Brinson, a former meth user, is completing the Drug Abuse Alternative Center's perinatal program.

Perinatal program has treated 328 women in past 6 years

By JEREMY HAY

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

The women pour out their histories, their hopes and their pain in a room with a battered, dark gray carpet and two balloons floating in a corner.

"I'll never forgive myself," says one. Like many of the others, she is pregnant. She drank well into her pregnancy and has been told her child likely will pay for that all his life.

The 17 women are here to mend themselves. And they are doing what they can to mend their children born

and their children yet to arrive.

"Whatever happened while you were pregnant, or whatever happened after your babies were born, if you were still using, it happened, it's done," said Jeannine Hays, the group's counselor.

Behind her chair, a dry-erase board lists the potential effects on newborns of drug or alcohol abuse during pregnancy, the subject of this morning session at the Drug Abuse Alternatives Center, the county's largest private provider of drug treatment services.

In the past six years, 328 women have been admitted to the county-funded perinatal treatment program for pregnant women and new mothers addicted to drugs or alcohol. About half were referred by the courts. Many of

TURN TO **ADDICTION**, BACK PAGE

DRUG'S HUMAN TOLL

"Meth's a horrible drug . . . the most dangerous drug we have now."

JUDGE ROBERT BOYD, Sonoma County Superior Court

THE FACTS ABOUT METH

DRUG'S ADDICTIVE PULL: Methamphetamine's unique neurobiological effects are among the reasons it is so addictive and why successful treatment often takes longer.

The drug acts on dopamine, a neurochemical integral to humans' experience of pleasure.

For example, dopamine spikes at 200 units during orgasm. Cocaine produces a spike of 350 units. Methamphetamine causes a spike of 1,250 units.

THE IMPACT:

■ There were 26 deaths in which methamphetamines were found to be a direct or a secondary factor between July 27, 2004, and July 1 of this year.

Of those, 14 were older than age 40; five were older than 50; 16 were white and seven Latino; 21 were male; and 15 were Santa Rosa residents.

■ In April, a random review of 402 inmate medical charts at the Sonoma County Jail found that 60 percent, or 240, reported using methamphetamines. The jail's daily population is generally about 1,100.

■ Eighty-eight percent of people admitted into county treatment programs for meth addiction between June 2004 and July 2005 had an education level of the 12th grade or less.

■ In 2004, whites comprised 74 percent of people in county treatment for meth addiction; Latinos made up 19 percent.

NUMBERS TO CALL FOR HELP:

■ Sonoma County Alcohol and Other Drug Services, 565-6945.

■ Drug Abuse Alternatives Center, 544-3295.

■ Latino Commission on Alcohol and Other Drug Services, 573-0117.

Sources: Sonoma County Methamphetamine Profile, July 2006 report to the Board of Supervisors; Sonoma County Alcohol and Other Drug Services; Sonoma County Sheriff's Department Coroner's Office, Dr. William McCausland, director, Kaiser Permanente Chemical Dependency Services.



Sonoma County Sheriff's Deputy Troy Newton searches for signs of methamphetamine in a transient camp along the railroad tracks south of Hearn Avenue in Santa Rosa on Wednesday as camp resident Estaban Gonzalez watches. Gonzalez says he currently is in a court-ordered treatment program.

METH: Recovering addict says he put drug before 'job, money, my lady, my son'

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

eting rise of methamphetamine use across the North Coast.

"I felt like I was complete, I was whole," Walker said.

Two years later, he was sent to California Youth Authority for robbery and selling drugs, the first of many periods he would spend behind bars. Last year, a brief stay at Casa Calmecac ended when he was kicked out for a violent outburst.

Walker's 8-month-old son was born while he was at San Quentin State Prison. When out of jail or prison, he smoked methamphetamine "until the wheels come off," he said. "A constant 24/7 meth chase."

Until his parole conditions sent him back to Casa Calmecac in June, "I put it first," he said. "I put it before I put my family, myself, I put it before a job, money, my lady, my son."

Now, he said, being clean and reunited with his family is something he wouldn't "trade in for no size bag, for no material thing . . . I know it's a matter of life and death."

30 percent of admissions

Since 2001, when California courts began ordering nonviolent drug offenders into treatment instead of jail, meth addicts entering county treatment programs have risen from 17 percent to 30 percent of all admissions, records show.

The increase of methamphetamine addicts in North Coast courts, hospitals and treatment centers will likely help shape future public policy and spending on drugs and crime.

Over the past decade, county spending for treatment has risen from \$1.4 million to \$5.9 million — as county supervisors in the mid-1990s began pushing for more treatment — while federal and state funding has been largely flat or declining.

Eighty percent of people now in treatment are referred by the courts, and more than half of all court referrals are methamphetamine addicts, said a report given last month to the Board of Supervisors.

The report said local methamphetamine use "significantly increased" in the 1990s "but has changed little since then," and alcohol still accounts for the most admissions.

But by 2003, methamphetamine addicts were entering county treatment programs at 2½ times the statewide rate.

And by the 2004-2005 fiscal year, the last for which full data is available, admissions for methamphetamine exceeded the number of countywide admissions for all



A lighter, crack pipe and air pistol were among items found by Sonoma County Sheriff's Deputy Troy Newton when he searched a transient camp Wednesday. Newton is skeptical about the effectiveness of court-ordered drug treatment.

other illicit drugs combined.

That change is driven by Proposition 36 — the Substance Abuse Crime Prevention Act — which voters approved in 2000 over opposition by politicians, law enforcement and many treatment professionals.

The law requires treatment instead of jail be offered to first- and second-time nonviolent drug use offenders. It allows judges to send defendants to jail only after their third violation. Since it took effect, more than 3,000 people have been referred to treatment.

Sonoma County opponents included then-District Attorney Mike Mullins, the Board of Supervisors, Giannavola and treatment professionals such as Michael Spielman, executive director of Drug Abuse Alternatives Center, the county's largest private treatment provider.

"I was concerned that it was going to be a setup for failure," Spielman said. He and others argued the law wouldn't work because it severely restricts judges' ability to imprison nonviolent offenders who don't finish treatment and it didn't increase funding for drug testing.

Today, however, Spielman is a believer: "It brought in considerably more people to treatment — hundreds and hundreds of people got treated who wouldn't have," he said.

System called revolving door

Count among the skeptics Sonoma County Sheriff's Deputy Troy Newton, a 12-year veteran who once wanted to be a teacher — and who has arrested hundreds of addicts like Charlie Walker.

Like many in law enforcement's rank and file, Newton's belief in treatment pro-

grams is profoundly limited.

The current system of court-ordered drug treatment is a revolving door in which drug users repeatedly get treatment instead of jail, and he repeatedly encounters them on the streets using again, Newton said.

"Programs don't work," he said on a night patrol of Roseland, his beat for seven years. Once, he said, he thought differently. "After years and years of seeing them, you kind of become calloused. It's just the same 10 percent keeping the other 90 percent down."

Programs key to curbing addiction

But Boyd — who has sent hundreds like Walker into treatment rather than jail — is squarely in the camp of those who once doubted its use but now believe it's a key to cutting drug abuse and related crime.

"We are getting people off meth . . . off for appreciable periods of time and staying off," he said. "I think we simply need to have better and more treatment available for everybody who needs it."

If more people are steered into proper treatment, fewer will return to court, said Boyd, a former civil law attorney and a judge for eight years. After nearly two years of presiding over drug cases, he said, "I'm much more supportive of treatment than I was before."

Recent statewide and county studies have found that people who completed treatment returned to jail less often than people who didn't, and that by cutting incarceration costs, treatment saved hundreds of millions of dollars.

The studies also concluded that meth addicts slide from treatment back into the criminal justice system at rates no different than other substance abusers.

Some "surprised" by success

The results have startled those who said that without the threat of being sent to jail, most people sent to treatment would soon start using drugs and get into trouble again.

"It surprised me that it works as well as it has," Boyd said, speaking in his chambers behind his courtroom, Department 15, which adjoins the jail and where drugs, crime, treatment and — at periodic Drug Court graduations — recovery from addiction mingle like few other places in the county.

"I find people are actually getting off drugs with it," he said, although he said he still favors amending the law to allow jail as a sanction for those who do not complete treatment.

A recent county study of the law's impact found:

■ Between 2001 and 2004, 56 percent of people the court sent to treatment were there for the first time.

■ Among those who finished treatment, homelessness dropped from 19 percent to 2 percent, employment rose from 43 percent to 77 percent and only 20 percent ended up back in the criminal justice system.

■ Those who completed treatment spent an average of seven days in jail in the year after their first court appearance, compared with 84 days for those who re-fused treatment.

A cost-benefit study by a UCLA research program the state hired to evaluate the law's first five years found that treatment for nonviolent drug offenders saved taxpayers \$2.50 for each \$1 spent. The analysis said the law saved \$173 million in its first year.

"The voters said, 'don't send them to jail, send them to treatment.' I think the voters were right, more so than the policymakers and the legislators," Giannavola said.

He has headed the county's substance abuse treatment division since 1980 and can recite the findings on fiscal savings as well as anyone.

But the bottom line, he said, is that "we're getting hundreds and hundreds of people into treatment who otherwise would not have been offered it in any form or fashion. Is it having an impact? Absolutely."

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ADDICTION: Mother lost custody of 6 children, her baby's father was shot dead because of meth

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

the others were sent by child protective services workers.

For 67 percent of the women, methamphetamine has been the chief drug of choice.

Of the current group of 40, meth is the primary addiction for 32, underscoring how pervasive and damaging the drug is on the North Coast, and the crucial role treatment occupies.

Overall, women comprised 37 percent of meth addicts in county treatment programs in the 2004-2005 fiscal year, data shows.

After the meeting, Tonia Brinson, 35, a Santa Rosa native and mother of

eight who started smoking meth when she was 13, tells of the cost.

"I suffered major consequences; I lost six of my children," she says, balancing her 1-year-old son, Justice, on her knee.

Two years ago, Lake County authorities permanently removed six of her other children, now ages 3 to 15, for adoption. In 1989, Brinson's first child tested positive for drugs at birth, and Sonoma County authorities terminated her parental rights. Her mother adopted the girl, who is now 17.

She tried several times on her own to get clean but never could, she said. She smoked meth until she was eight months' pregnant with Justice. Then,

in June, as authorities prepared to take him from her after his birth, she sought help.

"He probably saved my life," she says of Justice, whose father, Terry Lee Grinner Jr., 30, was shot dead by a Rohnert Park policeman during a nighttime foot chase in 2005.

Grinner was armed and had high methamphetamine levels in his blood, an autopsy found. The officer who shot him was cleared of wrongdoing.

District Attorney Stephan Passalacqua called the case an example of how methamphetamine use can lead to tragedy.

In Spartan rooms like this, women like Brinson deal with their tragedies, fight to get and stay clean, to find recovery for themselves and their children.

Sexual abuse. Domestic violence. Grief. Shame. That's what the women confront, said program counselor Kathy Peters, who at age 40 is 6½ years' free of her own meth addiction.

"To me, each time they stay clean is a success," she said, "as long as each time is longer than the last time."

Brinson says 12 of the women she started with in the program have gone back to drugs, but nine have returned. She plans to stay clean. She

wants to be a child protective services worker, she says, "one of the good ones." Once, before the drugs, she wanted to be a lawyer.

Now, she wants to be the best mother Justice could have.

"I thought I was a good mom back then," she says, "but even though I raised my kids good, all those hours, you know, I'd be smoking with friends, my kids are out there by themselves in the living room, just watching TV, it takes its toll, it really does."

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