

■ BUTTE COUNTY'S METH STRIKE FORCE: MODEL FOR SUCCESS

When Proposition 13 passed in California in 1978, few Californians could have imagined that the resulting tax cuts would herald the start of a "meth plague" that would reach epidemic proportions in our state, much less in our country. Like the fall of the first domino, Proposition 13's tax cuts made funding for law enforcement in rural areas like north-central California's Butte County almost nonexistent.

BEGINNING OF THE METH PROBLEM

First to take advantage of decreased funding in the early 1980s was the Misfits, a motorcycle gang that set up shop to produce and distribute methamphetamine in northern California. So brazen were members' actions that they actually placed advertisements in newspapers to spread the word; so lucrative was their operation that a turf war broke out with their rival, the Hells Angels, who took control of the business until organized crime from Mexico brought gangs to northern California. At the heart of it all was Butte County.

For local law enforcement, the ugly realities of the meth culture that followed became all too apparent. Investigators began seeing the kind of sad, inexplicable crimes that come with addicts' raw desperation: people robbed and killed for less than \$50.00, home invasion robberies by family members, prostitution by teens, and horrible child abuse and neglect. It was clear this drug was different from anything else, and, unfortunately, the addiction was just getting started.

Unlike other drugs, methamphetamine could be produced quickly and cheaply in anyone's kitchen or garage. For criminals, "cooking" meth was a great business: low overhead, low risk, high return, and the ultimate bonus of guaranteed "return customers." For law enforcement, it would be the ultimate nightmare.

EARLY EFFORTS BY COUNTY LAW ENFORCEMENT

By 1985, the Butte County Interagency Task Force (BINTF) was formed to deal specifically with the problem of meth labs in the county. Made up of representatives from local law enforcement agencies, BINTF was the team primarily charged with a seek-and-destroy mission to eradicate meth labs and deal with the inherent risks that came with it.

Lab busting was dangerous and difficult work, made even harder by what was so often found unexpectedly in the middle of it all: children. Infants, toddlers, preschool and school-age children, exposed to the most deadly

of circumstances. By the early 1990s, this heartbreaking scenario spurred a grassroots effort led by Officer Sue Webber-Brown that evolved into the Drug-Endangered Children program, or DEC. Started on a shoestring with not much more than an investigator with a pager and the cooperation of the district attorney's office and child protective services, the program has grown to become a successful statewide model.

At about the same time, Judge Darrell Stevens and Special District Attorney Helen Harberts were working on a serious problem of their own: the number of meth addicts who were repeat offenders who were plaguing the court system. It was clear that incarceration didn't work.

DRUG COURT

When county officials heard about a new approach called Drug Court, they were cautiously optimistic that the new concept of coerced treatment might work. A first-time offender would be eligible to avoid criminal conviction by successfully completing a customized program designed by the Drug Court team. This model required a huge commitment of collaboration between law enforcement and various treatment programs as well as ongoing reviews and drug testing of the addict.

Drug Court also needed funding. The enormous effort that was required to establish the Butte County Drug Court paid off, succeeding not only as a program but also as a training ground for staff of other troubled communities all over the country.

CONTINUING EFFORTS

As successful as these efforts were, they didn't change the amount of meth existing in Butte County. When Perry Reniff was elected sheriff in 2002, he faced not only the job of restructuring a troubled department but also the situation of Butte County ranking number one in the country for the number of meth labs per capita.

Along with Butte County's unenvied status came the statistics that showed that at least 75 percent of all violent crime was related to meth. With no budget to battle the problem and gangs

gaining ground every day, Sheriff Reniff embarked on a mission to change the county's grim ranking.

His first order of business was to challenge every county agency and public or private organization that had any stake in the problem to help create a unique strike force to fight meth in Butte County. Every group had to commit to send serious representatives from all the key areas.

BUTTE COUNTY METH STRIKE FORCE

What followed was an impressive caliber of people who were determined not to be part of just another ineffectual committee. Soon the Butte County Meth Strike Force (BCMSF) was born; its mission was to eliminate meth-amphetamine from Butte County by supporting prevention, treatment, and enforcement efforts. Its first project, the Web site at <http://2stopmeth.org>, is a reflection of the group's team approach and shared goals as well as a valuable community resource.

To date, the unique collaborative efforts made by BCMSF have created an impressive momentum toward real change. Law enforcement members have traveled all over the country sharing knowledge and training. Team members who focus on treatment brought to Butte County the nationally known chemical dependency and treatment expert, Dr. S. Alex Stalcup. Dr. Stalcup spoke to sold-out conferences that brought together physicians, psychiatrists, nurses, social workers, emergency medical personnel, law enforcement, attorneys, medical office staff, and others.

Most recently on the prevention front, the strike force has included a public relations consultant who donated the design and development of a full-fledged media campaign using shocking before-and-after photos of meth addicts. The campaign—Extreme Makeover, Meth Edition—was meant to draw in the public, and it included television, radio, print, rap contests, and a community press conference.

Currently, outreach includes working with the people at the Montana Meth Project for the rights to run their highly

successful, multimillion-dollar campaign (see information at www.notevenonce.com).

These efforts, as arduous as they have been, are now the solid foundation from which the ultimate goal can be reached: to eradicate the nightmare of meth from our community.

—Lynne Bussey

Volunteer Member

Butte County Meth Strike Force

Butte County, California