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California Doctors, Advocates Call for Public Health Approach On National Methamphetamine Day

Prevention and Treatment Are Best Response, Evidence Shows

SAN DIEGO, November 30 – On National Methamphetamine Awareness Day, San Diegans call for more prevention and treatment services to counter drug abuse. San Diego-based A New PATH (Parents for Addiction Treatment and Healing) has joined with the Drug Policy Alliance and the California Society of Addiction Medicine to urge local and state leaders to focus on prevention and treatment efforts, which are shown to be more successful and cost-effective than punitive measures.

Gretchen Burns Bergman, co-founder and executive director of A New PATH, said “It is tempting for our leaders to talk ‘tough on crime’ and to respond to addiction through increased criminal penalties. But, as the mother of two sons who have struggled with addiction and with the criminal justice system, I know that treatment, not incarceration, is what makes positive change—and recovery—possible.”

California is already ahead of most other states in implementing a public health approach to addiction, according to local advocates. In 2000 61% of California voters (56% of San Diegans) passed Proposition 36, the treatment-instead-of-incarceration law, which provides treatment to over 35,000 Californians convicted of nonviolent low-level drug offenses each year. About 2,000 people access the program each year in San Diego alone. What’s more, the program has saved taxpayers \$1.3 billion in just five years.

Margaret Dooley, San Diego-based Prop. 36 Coordinator for the Drug Policy Alliance, stressed “Prop. 36 is the country’s largest diversion program for people who suffer from addiction to methamphetamine, helping to improve lives, reunite families and reduce the burden on the state’s overcrowded prisons. Prop. 36 has also provided irrefutable evidence that methamphetamine addiction is treatable.”

According to data collected by researchers at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), over half (53%) of Prop. 36 participants name methamphetamine as their primary drug of abuse. That is, over 19,000 people enter treatment for methamphetamine abuse each year under Prop. 36. In the program, methamphetamine users have a treatment completion rate of 35%, higher than users of cocaine/crack (32%) or heroin (29%).

Dr. Shannon Chavez, medical director at UCSD Outpatient Psychiatric Services and member of the California Society of Addiction Medicine (CSAM), explained “Addiction is recognized as a medical illness by every medical association in the country, and addiction is treatable. Although treatment techniques differ depending on the drug type (such as with depressants like alcohol or stimulants like cocaine or methamphetamine), we must remember that the underlying condition is addiction, not the specific drug, and that our responsibility is to treat the person suffering from any addiction.”

According to CSAM’s Recommendations to Improve California’s Response to Methamphetamine issued earlier this year, “The media has stimulated a wave of public attention and uproar. But, from the perspective of addiction medicine, little has changed. Methamphetamine is one of many stimulants, with a few unique features, and methamphetamine abuse can be treated with the same level of success as other drug addictions.”

Learn more about Prop. 36 at <http://www.Prop36.org>. Read CSAM’s 2006 report on methamphetamine at http://csam-asam.org/pdf/misc/Meth_Recommendations.pdf. Read UCLA’s Prop. 36 analyses at <http://www.uclaisap.org/prop36/html/reports.html>.