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## Navajo Nation first lady calls for action on meth scourge

By *SONU MUNSHI/Cronkite News Service*

PHOENIX - One out of 10 eighth-, 10th- and 12th-graders in Navajo County has tried methamphetamine at least once, a figure that highlights the danger the drug poses to rural Arizona, the first lady of the Navajo Nation said Wednesday.

“This is the highest figure among all Arizona counties. We need to do something fast,” Vikki Shirley said, calling for more money to be devoted to treatment and enforcement.

Shirley, wife of Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley Jr., joined Attorney General Terry Goddard and other leaders at a ceremony honoring youths who have pledged not to try meth. Shirley is co-chair of the Arizona Meth Project, an advertising and education program.

Shirley said the Navajo Nation's size makes it difficult to combat meth abuse through education and law enforcement. Another challenge is that meth is relatively inexpensive.

“Adults can't deal with the poverty and lack of jobs in our area, and this is an easy way out for them,” she said.

Char James, program project specialist with the Navajo Nation's Department of Behavioral Health Services, said the reservation has only three treatment centers that can work with meth addicts. But she said those facilities already are struggling to deal with alcoholics and those addicted to other drugs.

Goddard said treatment centers are an important part of the battle against meth.

“We need prosecution, education and treatment,” Goddard said.

Cindy Schaider, coordinator of Casa Grande Alliance, a coalition for substance abuse prevention, said her community can use all the help it can get to fight meth.

“If you want an 18 year old to not start using, you have to get them at 12,” Schaider said.

Young people in rural Arizona are at greater risk of using meth, a survey conducted by the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission suggests. The 2006 Arizona Youth Survey found that eighth-, 10th- and 12th-graders in rural counties were generally more likely than those in Maricopa and Pima counties to have tried meth.

Two rural officials interviewed by phone said they'd welcome more help.

Robert DeVries, chief of police in Kingman, said his community needs to be able to provide lengthier treatment to meth addicts than it can now.

“If you throw these people back into the same den, chances are they'll go back to doing it again,” DeVries said.

Lenore Stuart, a member of the Yuma County Board of Supervisors, said her county would welcome help with enforcement.

“We don't have meth labs, but we have accessibility to the border,” Stuart said. “Ready-made meth is pouring in from there.”

At Wednesday's event, officials displayed banners on which 10,000 children statewide pledged never to try meth.

Laura Lopez, an eighth-grader at the Phoenix Preparatory Academy, was happy to make the pledge.

"I know of one person who was addicted, and thinking of that I thought, it's disgusting," Lopez said.

Melissa Yost of Casa Grande attended as a former addict who teaches young people about the dangers of meth. She said it took eight months and lots of family support to recover.

"When you come off meth, you get so depressed. That's what trips addicts, because it makes you feel like crap so you want to go out and get high," Yost said.

On the Web:

w Arizona Meth Project: [www.arizonamethproject.org](http://www.arizonamethproject.org)

w Arizona Attorney General's Office: [www.azag.gov](http://www.azag.gov)

w Navajo Nation: [www.navajo.org](http://www.navajo.org)

w Arizona Criminal Justice Commission: [azcjc.gov](http://azcjc.gov)