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The Growing Threat of Methamphetamine in Plumas County

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In the last few months Plumas County has seen a spike in the possession and use of methamphetamine. A veteran sergeant at our Sheriff's Office reports this is the worst he has seen our methamphetamine problem in the last twenty years. A review of criminal cases over the last five years shows Plumas County has seen a 37% increase in cases involving the possession of methamphetamine. While we always have had cases of possessing methamphetamine for sale, normally the amount involved was less than an ounce. In just the last two months we have seen possession for sale arrests grow to a number it would normally take half of a year to see - all possessing between 2 and 4 ounces of methamphetamine. Succinctly, we are seeing a spike in both supply and demand for methamphetamine. This combination and the horrible effects of methamphetamine pose a significant challenge to the health, safety and well-being of Plumas County.

Methamphetamine has been a scourge to rural America. Methamphetamine is a truly horrible substance – addictive, dangerous and destructive. Methamphetamine causes an intense rush of pleasure or euphoria by releasing a surge of dopamine in the brain. Over time, methamphetamine destroys one's dopamine receptors making it impossible to feel pleasure, no matter how much or how often the drug is consumed. Methamphetamine can cause drastic personality changes – with users becoming aggressive, impulsive and selfish. Physically, methamphetamine can cause damage ranging from brain injury similar to that caused by Alzheimer's disease, stroke or epilepsy, to tooth decay. In court we see the damage methamphetamine does to a user's appearance. For a sampling of the shocking transformation of a methamphetamine user, see <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/methamphetamine/body/faces.html>.

Plumas County now routinely sees methamphetamine in crystalline form ("crystal meth") often having been cut with hazardous additives so as to expand the batch being produced to create greater profit. Whether it is methamphetamine, the additive, or a combination, we continue to see a rise in episodes of methamphetamine-related psychosis. In the last month or so, Plumas County

law enforcement has encountered the following, for example: a Chester couple under the influence of meth whose argument over imaginary parasites in their drinks turns into wrestling over, and discharge of, a shotgun inside a residence; a Portola man, hallucinating while under the influence of methamphetamine, calling 911 to report his ex-wife, her boyfriend and their son have broken into his house by crawling through the roof, were stealing his keys and drugs, and were having sex on his pillow; a Quincy man suffering from a methamphetamine-induced psychosis attempting to use the Coinstar machine in Safeway as a telephone to call 911 and report imaginary people under his vehicle trying to blow it up. These examples should not leave the impression methamphetamine only harms the user. We know it also profoundly harms family members, neighbors and our community. Part and parcel of the uptick in methamphetamine sales and use has been an increase in property crimes, often undertaken to fund a user's habit. In addition to property crimes, sadly, we have also seen the ugly role meth plays in some of our most violent crimes. In the last five years, homicide prosecutions have demonstrated no less than six people in Plumas County have lost their lives at the hands of an assailant under the influence of methamphetamine or a similar drug.

An unintended result of the "sea change" of California criminal laws the past decade has been a reduction in tools to combat methamphetamine use. In 2011, AB109 shifted potential punishments for nearly all drug crimes from state prison to county jail. In 2014, California reclassified most drug crimes from felonies to misdemeanors. In the past few years, California eliminated increased punishment for those repeatedly convicted of trafficking dangerous drugs. During this time California's legislature has expanded the statutory provisions covering drug crimes to prevent a conviction for the first three drug-related arrests and incarceration for the first six drug-related arrests. With these changes in criminal law, Sacramento has provided additional funding to probation departments, who are tasked with supporting rehabilitation. While I do not believe in "warehousing" addicts, releasing such a person from custody over and over again without attempting to break the cycle of use and put in place some form of rehabilitative program is an approach destined to fail. To combat this drug and its horrific consequences we need our laws to not only support the thoughtful use of incarceration (to break the cycle of use) and the opportunity for rehabilitation but also provide an incentive for the individual to make the sober choice of rehabilitation.

In Plumas County, we fight issues such as this with action. To fight the growing scourge of methamphetamine, Plumas County must attack both supply and demand.

On the supply side, despite the debilitating changes to the laws governing the prosecution of methamphetamine traffickers, we have, and must continue to, aggressively prosecute methamphetamine sellers. There must continue to be an understanding when a person is caught trafficking methamphetamine, they will be appropriately and aggressively charged and we will seek a resolution consistent with the severe damage the drug does to our community. While our local law enforcement has done an excellent job investigating the trafficking of methamphetamine, we recognize we can always do better. To this end, our Sheriff's Office, DA's Office and local CHP Offices are coordinating to better share information and resources in

combating the proliferation of methamphetamine in our community. This coordinated and continuing attack on the supply of methamphetamine, however, is only part of the solution.

All of our efforts to attack the supply-side of the equation are meaningless if we are unable to curb the demand for methamphetamine. We must also embrace the rehabilitation of low-level drug offenders on probation with the same fervor with which we pursue violations. In the last three years we have seen a steady increase of those supervised by Probation being arrested. In 2017, 621 arrestees were assessed in the pretrial release program with 63 (10%) being on supervised probation. In 2018, the number assessed increased to 688 with 121 (17.6%) being supervised. This past year, in 2019, the number of arrestees grew to 775 with 157 (20%) being on supervised probation.

In Plumas County, recent years have brought a number of successful approaches. The return of our Drug Court (now Community Justice Court) implementing the programming from Alternative Sentencing's Prop 47 Grant/Program have demonstrated outstanding results, albeit on a small scale. The use of the Pretrial Release Program to identify arrestees with addiction issues and immediately make appropriate referrals to local resources equally has been successful and holds promise moving forward. Successful programs such as these must be increased in scale. To do so will require a thoughtful prioritization of our local resources. Concerted efforts by local law enforcement, the Alternative Sentencing Program, local partners such as Re-Think Industries, the new leadership of our Behavioral Health Department and the collaborative efforts of our Superior Court, defense bar and DA's office all have promise but are not enough. Again, we need all hands on deck. We need the full support of each involved department, of our local government and, most of all, the continued support from our community if we are to make sure the current spike in methamphetamine-related crime is an aberration rather than the new normal.