

## Methamphetamine in Barron County

The illegal drug, Methamphetamine, commonly known as Meth, has caused numerous problems for Barron County over the past year. Meth related law enforcement arrests in 2015 averaged more than three per week. Numbers in 2016 are on trend to surpass that. In 2015, over 1.2 million dollars was spent by the Barron County Department of Health and Human Services on meth related services. 2015 also showed that 50% of children placed in foster care or with relatives due to unsafe conditions in the home, were placed due to meth related issues. To date in 2016, that number has risen to over 70%.

“The use of methamphetamine in Barron County is rising at a disturbing rate, states Sheriff Chris Fitzgerald. Not only in Barron County but in all of Northwestern Wisconsin. The meth problem in our area is much greater than any one agency or county can tackle, he continued. We need to work together to keep our kids and communities safe”.

In response to the growing meth problem, Barron County has established a local meth task force and participates in a regional task force. Representatives from 11 counties in northwestern Wisconsin meet regularly to assess, share information and plan initiatives to help stop the meth epidemic. The group is currently working with the Wisconsin Department of Justice and the office of the Attorney General to plan a Statewide Meth Summit to be held in late January, 2017.

“It is imperative that we inform and educate local, regional and state stakeholders, says Sarah Turner, Prevention Specialist with the Barron County Community Coalition. Many times resources are focused on the southern part of the state. It is time to bring attention to the havoc that meth is wreaking on the children, families and communities of Northern Wisconsin. We need help and we cannot do it alone”.

The local Barron County task force consists of representatives from law enforcement, health and human services, public health and the local community coalition. The group has been working on many local initiatives. An all new Meth hotline, 715-537-METH was set up for residents to report any suspected meth related incidents, including child endangerment or to seek help for addiction. Another resource for Barron County residents was also created. The, *kNOw Meth Barron County* Facebook page. This page provides community education and shares details about the latest task force initiatives. Meth Town Hall Meetings are also being held in communities throughout Barron County to discuss the present burden of meth, what actions are being taken, what community members can do, and answer questions that residents present. Additionally, the task force is working with schools and other youth serving organizations to prevent methamphetamine use and gather data to help understand why people begin using this substance.

Barron County has also partnered with Burnette, Polk, Rusk and Washburn counties to invite local stakeholders to a joint meeting to look at what they can do to improve the meth problems in their communities and all of northwestern Wisconsin address the issue. The meeting will be held on November 30th in Rice Lake.

For more information and to learn more about what you can do to help stop the meth epidemic in Barron County, a town hall meeting will be held on November 15th at Red Cedar Church in Rice Lake at 6:30 pm. All are invited and welcome to attend.

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## Meth- How You Can Help

Ten years ago, most major interstates in the Midwest featured the, “Faces of Meth” billboards. The side-by-side, before-and-after mugshots showed in shocking clarity the devastating effects of methamphetamine (meth). Rotten and missing teeth, picked skin, scabbed over and sunken in faces, stared at many as they drove by. Today, methamphetamine is back in Barron County, but this time, with a slightly different look.

Trends in recent meth use show that more users are injecting the drug, which has somewhat lessened the number of users with “meth mouth.” Users also more commonly buy the drug from dealers rather than making it themselves in a meth lab. Previously, meth labs posed a dangerous threat to our community.

“Most of the meth is coming from the Twin Cities, stated Jason Hagen, Drug Investigator with the Barron County Sheriff’s Department. We aren’t seeing meth labs like we used to”.

Although the face of meth has changed, there are certain physical and social signs of Meth use that you should know. Recognizing these signs is the first step to helping someone in need.

- Incessant talking
- Psychotic behavior
- Paranoia
- Decreased appetite and unhealthy weight loss
- Unusual body odor, similar to ammonia or cat urine
- Burn marks on fingers or mouth
- Obsessively picking at hair or skin
- Strange sleeping patterns or not sleeping at all
- Engaging in repetitive meaningless tasks (like taking apart electronics or other household items for no apparent reason)
- Borrowing money often or stealing
- Changes in physical appearance, deterioration of hair, skin and teeth
- Missing school or work
- Changes in personality and/or friend groups

Young Children who are exposed to methamphetamine may also show some signs and symptoms.

- Hyperactivity
- Poor appetite or poor feeding
- Very sensitive to light, sound or other sources of stimulation
- Significant irritability
- Dislike of being touched or held
- Missing school
- Poor hygiene

If someone you know needs help, you suspect criminal activity or you believe a child may be in danger or is being neglected due to Meth use of a caregiver, call 715-537-METH.

“The meth hotline is a great tool for community members to help their friends, family and neighbors and ultimately make our communities a safer and healthier place for all, said Stacey Frolik, Director of Barron County Department of Health and Human Services. We encourage the

community to use it and use it often. We cannot solve the meth problem in Barron County alone. We need help and this provides an easy way for the community to get involved”.

The Meth hotline is a voicemail based system. In case of an emergency always dial 911.

To learn more about the burden of methamphetamine in Barron County and what you can do to help, attend the Methamphetamine Town Hall Meeting on November 15, 2016 at 6:30 pm at Red Cedar Church in Rice Lake.

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## A Story of Meth-One Man's Road to Recovery

Methamphetamine (meth) is a powerful, highly addictive and destructive drug. No one knows this more than Barron County resident, Daniel Swessel. As a 17 year old high school student, he had a wife, child on the way and two full time jobs.

"I was struggling to meet all of these demands, tells Swessel. I knew my neighbor had been using something, with all of his endless energy, but wasn't sure what. So one day I asked him about it and received what I thought was the answer to my struggles: Meth," he continues. I became unstoppable; excelling at all things. I kept telling myself, I'll just use enough to complete things and when everything quiets down I'll quit".

As time went on, Swessel was not able to stop and his addiction quickly progressed.

"Low and behold, I became a monster, a slave to this drug, he recalls. "I became verbally, physically and emotionally abusive. My wife finally saw how much I had changed into someone else and made the decision to leave my craziness. Yet, I thought the world I was living in was fabulous. I was delusional".

Eventually Swessel was able to move from Milwaukee to Hayward for what he hoped would be a fresh start. He immersed himself in work in an attempt to keep busy and away from Meth. However, before long he found a new supplier and discovered that meth was more prevalent there than in Milwaukee.

Fast forward a few years. Now living in Rice Lake, Swessel was about to have another child.

"I couldn't be coherent enough to take my laboring girlfriend to the hospital. I was not the supportive, caring and loving person that she needed through the birth of our daughter," he recalls. "I passed out on the recliner, only to have the nurses checking my vitals, seeing as how I hadn't moved for several hours. Having been awakened to the birth of my child; I was angry with the world for waking me from my rare slumber. This was to be a moment to cherish not hindered by my self pity having ran out of Meth".

From there Swessel's addiction hit an all time high and at one of his lowest points he describes cooking meth in the same house as his four month old baby. "I was big headed enough that when my daughter was about 4 months old, I was cooking meth in the same house as her. I was living in the middle of Rice Lake, just across from the high school, cooking meth, with my child in the house."

A few more years go by, with Swessel in and out of Jail and eventually losing custody of his second child.

"I wound up homeless, living in my car, with my 5 year old daughter, with no regard to anything other than having my "METH" in my pocket," said Swessel.

It was then that Swessel became, "an entrepreneur to stealing copper". It fueled his income and his addiction. Eventually, he was caught and sent to jail which gave him clean time, away from his drug which he hoped would help him become sober. However when released from jail, Swessel relapsed.

"It was so hard for me to stay clean; I had no structure, no program, nothing. Just meth, dangling in front of my face everywhere I went, as the people I knew and called friends still used."

Eventually Swessel was caught again, only this time he was offered the option of enrolling in the Drug Court program. A program that provides monitoring, frequent and random drug testing, rewards for success, sanctions for violations and wrap around services for participants.

“I was accepted to the drug court program only on the belief that in my fantasy land that I could continue to use and just fake the tests. I could stay high just one more day. I was quickly caught and sent off to treatment which I completed and returned only to jump right back with the same crowd of people and relapsed again”.

This was a turning point for Swessel. He came to realize that the common problem was the people he surrounded himself with. So as an alternative to facing termination from the Drug Court program, he presented the idea of 60 days in jail to get clean and distance himself from those people.

“I found the system of going to meetings, breathalyzers, drug tests and the program itself gave me a routine to my life, something I had never had, a way to live sober.”

Since becoming sober, Swessel has reconnected with his ex wife and both of his children. Through the support of his employer he has maintained his job as an industrial electrician. He now shares his powerful story to promote awareness of the destruction this drug can cause and to give hope to those struggling with addiction.

“I am my own person with my own views, my own beliefs of who will succeed in this world having been given that second chance to prove myself, stated Swessel. “There is a better way to live, no more ducking and dodging but facing life head on. Accepting my faults as ways to grow. Not an excuse to use. Today, I am free of the shackles of addiction, ever reminded of the life I may have lost but now enjoy”, he concluded.

To hear more of Dan Swessel’s story, learn what you can do to help people who are suffering from meth addiction and what you can do to help prevent meth use, please attend the Town Hall meeting, Tuesday November 15, 2016 at 6:30 pm at Red Cedar Church.

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## Meth-Moving Barron County Forward

On November 15, 2016 nearly 250 people attended the Barron County Meth Town Hall meeting in Rice Lake. The Barron County Sheriff's Department, Department of Health and Human Services, District Attorney and Honorable Judge Bitney shared information about the destructive impact of meth on the community as a whole and the customers they serve. Also shared were the stories of three community members. They each described the toll that meth played on their lives and that of their family and friends while spreading a message of hope to those caught in meth's grasp.

"I am so impressed by the amount support from the community", states Sheriff Chris Fitzgerald. I was energized and inspired by the conversation that night. Thank you to everyone who came. With your help, we will make a difference. We will beat this."

Since March of 2016, Barron County has hosted seven Meth Town Hall meetings in various communities throughout the County. The goal of each meeting is to educate the community about this drug, bring awareness to the problems it causes, and to work together to identify solutions to strengthen our community.

While the problem may seem daunting, there are many ways to help, says Sarah Turner, Prevention Specialist with the Barron County Community Coalition. "Supporting sober living for those in recovery is essential to their success. Sometimes it can be difficult for those in recovery to move forward in their life, she continues. "Many times those in recovery are unable to find jobs or new places to live and end up going to back to familiar circles where relapses are almost inevitable. So we ask, if you are a landlord, consider renting to a recovering addict, perhaps even at a reduced rate. If you're an employer, consider hiring a recovering addict who is qualified to meet your staffing needs, or help a support a current employee through their recovery process. If you're a recovering alcoholic or addict with long-term sobriety actively involved in AA or other similar recovery programs, consider becoming a sponsor. If you are a concerned citizen, consider becoming a volunteer or a mentor. Invite those in recovery to your book club, garden club or sober sports teams. Help them find sober activities and friends. Most importantly, talk to your kids. Research has shown that teens whose parents talk to them about not using drugs and alcohol are forty two percent less likely to use than those whose parents don't", she concluded.

To continue educating the community and building resiliency against this drug, the Barron County Community Coalition will be co-hosting a Regional Meth Stakeholder's meeting for community leaders, on November 30, 2016 at Turtleback Banquet Center in Rice Lake. This meeting is taking place in partnership with Coalitions from Burnett, Polk, Rusk and Washburn counties. There will be a brief presentation followed by roundtable discussions. This meeting will focus on actions to be taken to help the meth problem in Northwestern Wisconsin. If you are interested in attending this meeting, please contact Jeanine Schultz at [jeanine.schultz@co.barron.wi.us](mailto:jeanine.schultz@co.barron.wi.us) or 715-537-5691.

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