

Substance abuse is an issue in every corner of Minnesota, including Benton County. Lately, the rising problem of heroin and opioid abuse has garnered much attention. Heroin and opioids are a rising area of concern, however the substance that continues to give me the greatest concern in our area remains methamphetamine. The abundant supply of methamphetamine and the destruction this substance brings to those who abuse it make it my substance of greatest concern.

The Central Minnesota Violent Offender Task Force (VOTF) is a multi-jurisdictional group of investigators dedicated to finding and arresting individuals involved in drug trafficking and other violent crimes in Benton, Stearns, Sherburne, Morrison, and Todd Counties. Between 2010 and 2019, the number of people arrested annually by the VOTF for methamphetamine-related crimes increased 73% and the amount of methamphetamine seized by the VOTF increased almost 20-fold. Every year between 2010 and 2019, methamphetamine accounted for the highest number of controlled substance arrests made by the VOTF locally.

Methamphetamine addiction extracts a terrible price from its victims. These individuals often suffer horrible health consequences, disruptions to their family life, loss of employment, and sometimes a pathway to more criminal behavior. The Central Minnesota Mental Health Center (CMMHC) is one of the many providers of addiction treatment in our area. Danielle Brant is the Director of Chemical Health Services at CMMHC. According to Brant, the CMMHC offers a wide variety of inpatient, outpatient, and detox services for those struggling with substance abuse disorders. In addition to CMMHC, providers like Nystrom and Associates, Sobriety First, CentraCare, and the St. Cloud VA Medical Center offer services for substance abuse issues locally. Even in an area where substance abuse services are available, other barriers may make it difficult for people to obtain treatment. Brant indicated that in her experience these barriers include the cost of a program, finding a program that fits an individual's unique needs, and the fear and shame those in need may feel. Brant pointed out that most health insurance providers cover all or at least a portion of the cost for addiction programs and that those without insurance may be able to obtain assistance from their county's human services department. Leah Holzem, Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor at CMMHC, and Program Manager at Focus XII Halfway House addressed the emotional barriers involved in seeking treatment by saying, "Fear and shame create such a barrier for individuals seeking treatment. Many are afraid to ask for help. We need to treat addiction like any other disease; reduce the shame and fear and help those suffering." For those wondering if they or someone they know has a substance abuse disorder, Holzem recommended being alert for the following signs and symptoms, "In regards to methamphetamine use: limited sleeping and abnormal behavior such as ADHD-type symptoms (inability to focus, hyperactivity, etc). For substance use in general: isolation, erratic behavior, high risk behavior, and dishonesty." If you recognize these signs and symptoms in a friend or family member, Holzem has the following advice, "(b)e kind and compassionate. Do not shame. Do not ignore the addictive-behavior as it will intensify. Tell the loved one that you care about their health and wellness and want to help them find services should they need them. Provide them with the phone numbers for Crisis and Detox (via CMMHC) and/or a treatment center. They can call on their own when they are ready; or if they are ready, you can assist." To learn more about how the CMMHC can help you or someone you know with substance abuse concerns contact them via telephone at 320-252-5010 or visit their website at CMMHC.org. Other treatment resources are also available online at samhsa.gov.

If you suspect that someone in your neighborhood is involved in trafficking methamphetamine or other drugs, your local law enforcement agency wants to know about it. Be alert for places where

neighbors may see cars repeatedly arriving and leaving within 5 to 10 minutes or less. Residences where controlled substances are sold often are occupied by people who have erratic schedules, no known employment, and keep unusual hours. Particularly for those selling or using methamphetamine, it is common for individuals to be up and moving about for days at a time without sleeping. Individuals involved in selling controlled substances often go to great lengths to prevent the outside world from seeing what is going on inside their residence. Completely covering all windows (particularly with non-traditional items like paper or bedsheets) or other actions that create an unusual level of privacy could indicate an issue. These circumstances, or any other activities that strike you as being unusual, should be reported to your local law enforcement agency.

For those struggling to break free from the snare of methamphetamine addiction, places like the CMMHC offer hope. Those who chose to engage in the sale and distribution of methamphetamine or other drugs should know that they are on a path that will likely involve a stay in a jail cell. If you know someone with a substance use problem, please be courageous and persistent in pointing them towards the help they need. If you suspect controlled substance sales are occurring in your neighborhood, contact local law enforcement.

A community free from methamphetamine's grip is one we are proud to work toward at the Benton County Sheriff's Office. We hope that you are willing to join us. For more crime prevention and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.