



Butte County
meth strike forces
model for success

By LYNNE BUSSEY

Lynne Bussey is a public relations consultant and volunteer member of the Butte County Meth Strike Force.

The history of methamphetamine in Butte County stretches back more than 20 years. In the early 1980s, tax cuts made funding for law enforcement in the county's rural areas sparse. Around then, the Misfits, a motorcycle gang, set up shop to produce and distribute methamphetamine in Northern California. So brazen were their actions, they actually placed advertisements in newspapers to spread the word. The money was so lucrative that a turf war broke out with their rival Hells Angels, who took control of the business until organized crime from Mexico brought gangs to Northern California. And at the heart of it all was Butte County.

For local law enforcement, the ugly realities of the meth culture to follow became all too apparent. Investigators began seeing the kind of sad, inexplicable crimes that come with raw desperation in addicts: people robbed and killed for less than \$50; home invasion robberies by family members; prostitution in teens; horrible child abuse and neglect. It was clear this drug was different than anything else, and unfortunately, it was just getting started.

Unlike other drugs, methamphetamine could be produced in anyone's kitchen or garage quickly and cheaply. It was made with simple, everyday ingredients that anyone could purchase, and it was extremely addictive. For criminals, "cooking" meth was a great business: low overhead, low risk, high return and the ultimate bonus of guaranteed return customers. For law enforcement, it would be the ultimate nightmare.

By 1985, the Butte County Interagency Task Force (BINTF) was formed to deal specifically with the problem of meth labs in Butte County. Made up of representatives from local law enforcement agencies, BINTF was the team primarily charged with a "seek and destroy" mission to eradicate meth labs and deal with the inherent risks that came with it: the danger of confronting an enraged psychotic, the probability of fire and chemical explosion, the long-term consequences of lung contamination and absorption of carcinogenic substances.

Lab busting was dangerous and difficult work, made even harder by what was so often found in the middle of it all: children. Infants, toddlers, pre-school and older, exposed to the most deadly of circumstances. By the early 1990s, this heart-breaking scenario spurred a grass roots effort led by a police officer that evolved into the Drug Endangered Children program, or DEC. Started on a shoestring with not much more than an investigator with a pager, cooperation of the District Attorney's office, and Child Protective Services, the DEC program has grown to become a successful statewide model.

At about the same time, a local judge

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and district attorney were working on a serious problem of their own: the number of meth addicts who were repeat offenders plaguing the court system. It was clear that incarceration didn't work. Upon hearing about a new approach called "drug court," they were cautiously optimistic that the new approach might work. A first-time offender would be eligible to avoid criminal conviction by successfully completing a customized program designed by the drug court team. This model required a huge commitment of collaboration between law enforcement and various treatment programs, as well as ongoing reviews and drug testing the addict. It also needed funding.

The enormous effort that was required to establish the Butte County Drug Court paid off, succeeding not only as a program, but quickly becoming a training ground for other troubled communities all over the country.

As successful as these efforts were, they didn't change the amount of meth emerging in Butte County. When a new sheriff was elected in 2002, he was not only faced with the job of restructuring a troubled department, he inherited Butte County with the status of being the number one county in the country for number of meth labs per capita. Along with it came the statistics that showed at least 75 percent of all violent crime was related to meth. With no budget to battle the problem, and gangs gaining ground everyday, the sheriff embarked on a mission to change the county's grim ranking.

His first order of business was to throw down the gauntlet to every county agency and public or private organization that had any stake in the problem. He challenged them to help create a unique strike force to fight meth in Butte County by committing to send serious representatives from all the key areas. What followed was an impressive caliber of people who were determined not to be another ineffectual committee. Too many had seen what meth could do to families, the environment, the emer-

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gency rooms, and law enforcement. Soon the Butte County Meth Strike Force was born, with the mission of "Eliminating Methamphetamine from Butte County by supporting Prevention, Treatment, and Enforcement efforts." Their first project, the Web site *2stopmeth.org* is truly a reflection of the group's team approach and shared goals, as well as an incredible community resource.

To date, the unique collaborative efforts made by the Strike Force have created an impressive momentum toward real change. Law enforcement members have traveled all over the country sharing knowledge and training, most recently in New York City. Team members dealing with treatment have brought a nationally renowned chemical dependency and treatment expert to Butte County to address physicians, psychiatrists, nurses, social workers, emergency medical personnel, law enforcement, attorneys, medical office staff and others that interact with this population in need.

And most recently on the prevention front, the Strike Force has started a full-fledged media campaign utilizing shocking "before and after" photos of meth addicts. The campaign, "Extreme Makeover, Meth Edition" was meant to draw in the public at large, and included TV, radio, print, rap contests and a community press conference.

These efforts, as arduous as they have been, are now the solid foundation from which the ultimate goal may be reached: to eradicate the nightmare of meth from our community. If the Butte County Strike Force track record is any indicator, it will no doubt be possible. ■