

# Steve Bullock



## Prescription Drugs: The Invisible Epidemic

No one would seriously argue over whether methamphetamine has wreaked tremendous destruction in our communities.

It has, and we are aggressively attacking the problem. The Montana Meth Project opened our eyes, turned our stomachs, and educated us all. And by placing cold medicines containing pseudoephedrine behind pharmacy counters, the ability to locally manufacture meth has become much more difficult, causing the number of meth labs to fall dramatically.

Montana has converted the meth epidemic into what may soon become a manageable problem. Sure, we must remain ever vigilant. Yet, we must also open our eyes to other abuses.

Another outbreak is sweeping our state. It is less discussed and, in some circles, even ignored. The drug dealers may not appear quite as shady, and often are unaware that they are even contributing to the problem. The transactions are not limited to back alleys, and may equally occur in a pharmacy, a doctor's office, or our own homes. While the public is largely oblivious to this epidemic, we are losing Montanans on an almost daily basis.

Nationally, nonmedical use of prescription drugs is second only to marijuana in illegal drug use. And Montana sets, rather than follows, the national trend. A recent study conducted by the federal government's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration found that Montana ranks third per capita in teen abuse of prescription pain relievers, with almost 10 percent of our youth between the ages of 12-17 abusing these dangerous drugs.

The direct and tangible impact of prescription drug abuse has reached a level that should concern us all. In 2007 there were eight deaths directly attributable to methamphetamine in Montana; a tragedy, no doubt. During the same time, toxicology reports show a whopping 141 deaths in Montana were directly attributable to the use and abuse of four prescription pain relievers alone: fentanyl, hydrocodone, methadone and oxycodone. Over 140 lives lost, yet no public outcry for reform.

The time has come to stop this invisible epidemic in its tracks. First, Montana needs to establish a prescription drug monitoring program. No need to reinvent the wheel, here, because 35 states have already established these programs. Most programs provide patient specific drug information upon request of the patient's physician or pharmacist. Some state programs actively notify physicians when their patients are seeing multiple prescribers for the same class of drugs, and most provide for law enforcement access, when appropriate. These programs can deter and identify many types of illegal activity including prescription forgery.

Second, we must do all we can to curb doctor shopping, or the practice of actively seeking to obtain the same or similar prescription within brief period of time from multiple physicians. Ten states have already expressly made doctor shopping a crime, and it is time Montana joins that growing list.

Third, we must realize that all too often the problem starts in our own medicine cabinets. Nationally, almost half (47 percent) of teens using prescription drugs say they get them for free from a relative or friend, and 62 percent say prescription pain relievers are easy to get from parents' medicine cabinets. Most people are not even aware of what dangers remain in the half-empty pill bottles cluttering our cabinets.

Finally, we must educate our children, friends and neighbors. It is time to add visibility and attention to the epidemic of prescription drug abuse. Working together — parents, schools, law enforcement and the medical community — we can curb this unnecessary loss of life and reverse this trend before it gets any worse.



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