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Local News

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Hawai'i war on ice 'on the right track'

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Advertiser Staff Writers

Hawai'i has made strides in its fight against crystal methamphetamine, or "ice," with millions more in state money invested in treatment and a much stronger realization across the Islands about the dangers of the drug.

But two years after an intense public focus on ice, state officials still do not seem to have a grasp on the exact dimensions of the problem or an agreement on how to balance new spending on treatment and prevention with law enforcement.

The state's struggle with ice, which has been described by some as an epidemic and the worst in the nation, is still being defined largely by anecdotes and scattered and often conflicting data.

Ice remains the drug of choice for many in Hawai'i, with devastating consequences for people who fall into abuse or addiction and expensive healthcare and criminal-justice costs for the state. But early estimates by federal law enforcement officials about how many Hawai'i residents use the drug appear to have been inflated, while the state's response over the past two years often has lacked urgency and consistency.

Like it was when Edgy Lee's gripping documentary about ice first aired on television in September 2003, and the state's policymakers met at an ice summit, the prevalence of ice abuse often depends on who you are and where you live. Drug experts have warned that ice can touch anyone — from beauty queens to police officers to prominent attorneys — but people living in poverty or in rural areas are still more likely to suffer and less likely to have easy access to professional help.

"It's sort of frightening. I don't have an answer," said Patty Kahanamoku Teruya, who serves on the Wai'anae Neighborhood Board and who helped organize sign-waving demonstrations against the drug two years ago. "I've seen families that I knew before — that you'd never think would have trouble with drugs or alcohol — and you see them out on the beaches

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now, homeless.

"It seems like there has been an increase in ice along our coast."

Alan Shinn, executive director of the Coalition for a Drug-Free Hawai'i, praised the investment in treatment and prevention but believes the state's response has not been very well executed.

"I think, like any high visibility issue in Hawai'i, it got politicized," Shinn said of the differences between the Lingle administration and Democrats in the state Legislature. "Certainly there is a perception that there is a lack of coordination. And I think that to me is bad. It looks like we don't know what we're doing."

## **STATISTICS AND TRENDS**

The state is still working with the University of Hawai'i on a central clearinghouse for information on the drug, so state officials are unable to readily provide a complete account of the depth of ice abuse. Statistics compiled by several different sources show the trends:

- Fifty people died from ice-related circumstances during the first seven months of this year, according to the Honolulu medical examiner's office, and fatalities this year could easily surpass last year's three-year high of 67 deaths.
- Inpatient and emergency room visits at select hospitals that were linked to amphetamine use declined last year, with 2,792 visits compared with 2,985 visits in 2003. But the number of visits last year was still higher than in 2002 and substantially higher than in 2000. While the total number fell last year, the charges increased — to \$29.6 million.
- The number of adults admitted to treatment programs tracked by the state has increased over the past two years, according to the state Department of Health, with 3,136 adults in treatment last year, up from 3,013 in 2003 and 2,730 in 2002. The numbers do not reflect new spending on treatment approved by state lawmakers last year — money that was released by Gov. Linda Lingle over six months and did not reach treatment providers in time to have much influence on last year's statistics.
- During the second quarter of this year, 1.9 percent of the nearly 10,000 people tested for drugs during pre-employment or random workplace sampling tested positive for amphetamines, according to Diagnostic Laboratory Services, the state's largest drug-testing laboratory. It was a slight increase over the 1.6 percent who tested positive during the second quarter of last year, but much higher than the 0.5 percent of workers nationally who test positive for amphetamines.
- Ice arrests and cases involving the drug are on pace this year to hit a four-year high in Honolulu, according to the Honolulu Police Department's narcotics/ vice division. As of the end of June, Honolulu police have handled 504 ice cases and made 379 arrests. In 2004, Honolulu narcotics/vice officers and patrol officers made 708 ice arrests, up from 578 in 2003.

## **NO STATEWIDE OVERVIEW**

Statewide, it is unclear whether ice arrests are increasing, because comparable statistics for the Neighbor Islands were not readily available. Hawai'i County Police Chief Lawrence Mahuna has said ice arrests on the Big Island, where ice abuse is an acute problem, have risen every year for the past three years. Federal law enforcement officials, meanwhile, report that arrests and seizures in Hawai'i are on track to match or exceed last

year's totals.

But law enforcement officials say it is difficult to know whether increased enforcement is slowing the spread of ice.

"The scope of the crystal methamphetamine epidemic in Hawai'i is so pervasive that it is difficult to quantify," said Larry Burnett, director of the Hawai'i High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, a partnership of federal, state and county law enforcement agencies. "Equally important to this effort is effective treatment of the addicted and robust education and prevention measures among our youth."

Emotional and heart-wrenching stories from families torn apart by ice seemed to validate the staggering initial estimates about ice abuse in Hawai'i. Federal law enforcement officials originally said as many as one in 10 Hawai'i residents used the drug, but have since settled on a figure of about 30,000 ice users — or enough to fill the Blaisdell Arena more than three times over.

People familiar with drug abuse, but concerned about minimizing the problem or publicly contradicting law enforcement, believe the number of ice users likely is fewer than 30,000.

After Lee's documentary and the ice summit, ice was one of the issues that shaped the 2004 session of the Legislature, when Democrats approved \$14.7 million in new treatment and prevention money and stronger criminal penalties.

Gov. Linda Lingle and Republican lawmakers claimed the Democrats' plans fell well short on enforcement, and the governor did not release the treatment money until she was convinced the programs would be effective.

Rather than repeat the same fight this year, Lingle did not mention ice in her State of the State speech and turned much of her attention to issues such as affordable housing and tax relief. Democrats worked to retain some of the treatment money they had approved the year before rather than expand new spending on ice.

#### **AIONA'S APPROACH**

Lt. Gov. James "Duke" Aiona released the administration's drug-control plan in January to mostly poor reviews from state lawmakers and some in the treatment community who complained that it dealt too much with enforcement and on outreach that was not directly related to ice, such as underage drinking. Both Aiona and his drug-control liaison, Tamah-Lani Noh, have described the administration's recommendations as a drug-control plan, not an ice plan.

"We knew the drug strategy had to be comprehensive," Lingle said. "And the lieutenant governor was the first to recognize that there is not one thing you do. It's not about just treatment. It's not about just prevention. It's not about just law enforcement. It's about all those things and we need to keep focused on them."

"My own feeling is that we've made great strides in working with the communities at the local level. There is a lot more grass-roots focus on this issue."

Some who work in treatment and prevention and who believe ice is the most serious drug problem in the Islands are confused by the administration's focus, along with some leading Democrats, who argue the administration has dragged its feet on ice.

"I've been disappointed with the administration from Day 1 on this issue," said state Sen. Rosalyn Baker, D-5th (W. Maui, S. Maui), the chairwoman of the Senate Health Committee. "We could be losing generations of folks if we don't tackle this issue. It's an issue that we as a society need to deal with. It's something that we need to put resources into."

But most of the people contacted by The Advertiser think Aiona has done a good job of raising awareness about substance abuse that has complimented the treatment money from the Legislature.

"I think we're on the right track. I think there is a lot of hope," said Barbara-Ann Keller, the administrator for the Maui drug court who served on a state advisory commission on drug abuse.

"He's got some people talking. That's an important part of social change."

### **SCHOOL-BASED HELP**

The new treatment money has allowed the Health Department to offer school-based treatment at every public high school and to expand into middle schools, where counselors believe they can reach young people before they become addicted. The Lingle administration also has made use of federal money to expand afterschool programs for young people that promote drug prevention.

Jeffrie Wagner, executive director at the Bobby Benson Center, an adolescent residential treatment center in Kahuku, said he has been able to provide four more beds through new treatment money and believes the ice problem will only get worse without aggressive intervention.

"The earlier you intervene in drug use, the better the outcomes are for success and staying sober," Wagner said.

At Hina Mauka, a treatment center in Kane'ohe, the fight against ice is often measured by tears and frustration. On an evening last week, people with loved ones caught up in addiction talked about their pain.

An elderly woman was torn by whether to bail her adult son out of jail and get him into treatment so it might look better when he faces sentencing in court. A couple told of how they confessed to members of their church about their daughter's addiction.

And a mother with more than three decades in Alcoholics Anonymous wondered why she was so unaware of the signs of her daughter's ice habit.

One couple, holding hands, explained how their son's ice abuse had put a strain on their marriage. The father was plainly disappointed by his son's lack of progress, while the mother had optimism in her voice when she said her son was in the third week of an outpatient treatment program, even though her instincts told her something else.

"Deep down inside," she said, "I think he's still using."

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