

News from
Congressman
Bart Gordon

Tennessee's 6th Congressional District

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 12, 2004

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Gordon Explores Avenues To Fight Tennessee's Meth Problem

GALLATIN – Methamphetamine abuse in the state has local communities scrambling for ways to cope with a highly addictive habit that causes tremendous amounts of collateral damage, U.S. Rep. Bart Gordon said.

“Not only do meth users put themselves at risk, but they also put the lives of their children and neighbors at risk,” Gordon said after listening to local, state and federal officials describe their concerns about the highly addictive drug often made in makeshift laboratories set up in homes, apartments, hotel rooms and even automobile trunks.

“The highly volatile chemicals used to make the drug can be extraordinarily dangerous. Explosions at these clandestine labs have hurt a lot of people over the years. Methamphetamine production is a scourge that endangers lives in all kinds of ways.”

Gordon, ranking member of the House Science Committee, conducted a roundtable discussion on the state's meth abuse problem at Volunteer State Community College in Gallatin on Monday (May 10). Those who participated in the discussion are on the front lines of this growing problem in Tennessee, he said.

Betsy Dunn of the state's Department of Children's Services said the problem is taking its toll on the most innocent victims, the children of meth addicts.

“Users are absolutely unconcerned about anything else,” she said. “When you go into these homes, you find 8-year-olds raising 3-year-olds. This drug is all consuming.”

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As of March 2004, DCS had custody of 1,500 children because of meth arrests. In Tennessee, a parent who produces or uses methamphetamine in the presence of a child is committing child neglect or abuse. Upon the arrest of the parent, a child is automatically placed in the custody of the DCS.

Methamphetamine is an extremely addictive stimulant made from over-the-counter drugs and common household chemicals. Users are often violent and delusional.

Long-term use can even lead to brain damage or death. Infants born to addicted mothers are at risk for premature birth, growth retardation and altered neonatal behavioral patterns.

Dr. Sullivan Smith, medical director of the Cookeville Regional Medical Center, said brain scans of meth users indicate that their brains do not return to normal activity or function for a full year after stopping usage of the drug.

And Bill Gibson, district attorney general for the 13th Judicial District of Tennessee, which includes Putnam County, said the relapse rate for meth users is an unfortunate 95 percent.

“It takes about 1 and a half to two years to get these people to trial after they are caught,” Gibson explained. “In the meantime, they are usually out on bail still making and taking the stuff, endangering even more lives.”

Gibson said jail or prison time often is not a deterrent for a meth addict. He suggested a whole new approach may be needed to stop people from abusing methamphetamine.

Just last year, Gordon secured \$500,000 to help the 13th Judicial District Drug Task Force combat methamphetamine production in Clay, Cumberland, DeKalb, Overton, Pickett, Putnam and White counties.

Both Gordon and Gibson said they were hopeful more federal money and research could be allocated to help local officials fight the problem from many different angles, including detection, prosecution, treatment and site clean up.

Meth production raises serious environmental concerns within the community, according to Jeff Boles, director of the Environmental Science Doctoral program at Tennessee Technological University. He explained that byproducts from meth production may pose a risk to local water supplies if enough gets into the groundwater.

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Harry Sommers, assistant special agent in charge of the Nashville office of the Drug Enforcement Administration, echoed that concern. He said the agency only removes and disposes of the chemicals found in these clandestine labs.

Residual chemicals and pollutants may remain after the former lab site is “cleaned up,” he said.

Other officials noted that no standards or guidelines currently exist for what designates a site as “clean.”

“We have a real problem here in Tennessee,” Gordon said. “That’s why I brought this Science Committee hearing to Tennessee. We wanted to hear from the experts and those who have to deal with this problem on a daily basis.

“I want to take this information back to Washington to fight for more Federal help in terms of research and development programs. Local communities shouldn’t have to face this problem alone,” the congressman added.

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