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City joins in statewide campaign to fight meth use

By Kandra Wells

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McAlester's city council Tuesday agreed to donate \$300 to a community drug awareness campaign featuring a documentary to be broadcast to the public in January.

The Crystal Darkness campaign plans a statewide half-hour television broadcast on Jan. 13 beginning at 6:30 p.m., with free "watch parties" planned at the Stipe Recreation Center and the Expo Center. The documentary, to be aired simultaneously on all channels in the state, is specific to Oklahoma and based on a national model for awareness about methamphetamine use and its impact.

Tammy Randazzo of the Oklahoma Department of Health and the Pittsburg County Local Service Coalition asked the city council at its regular meeting Tuesday to waive \$300 in fees for using the Expo Center. A city ordinance designed to reduce fee waivers would not apply in this case, as it is a non-profit use for a "valid governmental service," attorney Joe Ervin said. The council agreed.

The city leaders had watched a short video promoting the documentary, which explained how the program was started in Western states. Following a high-profile launch campaign announcing a program, the documentary is shown on several television stations at the same time. The video showed some follow-up with phone banks of callers seeking help, but it was unclear exactly how that help would be delivered, or by whom.

Randazzo said the local health coalition is working to plan the local watch parties, with a panel expected to address the public at the Expo site. Both sites are to offer free refreshments, she said.

"We've never addressed methamphetamine as a community," Randazzo said. "It has always been a law enforcement issue."

Councilmen Tuesday agreed, noting the impact that abuse of the drug has had on unemployment, public education and families in the area.

"Almost every family has some relative or immediate family affected by this," Ward Six councilman Sam Mason said. "It really does break your heart to see some of these very young children exposed to drugs."

Others cited problems employers report in finding enough drug-free workers to keep their businesses open and operating.

Randazzo said Oklahoma high school seniors are more likely than any others in the nation to use methamphetamine, and that Pittsburg County's use of the drug is the fourth highest among the state's 77 counties.

In 2002, the News-Capital produced an award-winning special section about methamphetamine use and its impact on the area. Six years ago, a group called Partners for a Healthy Community already cited methamphetamine use as one of the biggest problems in the city.

Randazzo said methamphetamine use is "a community issue. It affects everyone."

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