

Help on way to Utah

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Meth-exposure 'cure' works, says Pleasant View's police chief

Relief may be on the way for police officers ailing because of exposure to methamphetamine labs.

Utah Attorney General Mark Shurtleff's initiative on behalf of scores of sick former narcotics officers will soon open an in-state treatment center offering the New York Rescue Workers Detoxification Program.

"Within 30 days, we hope to start sending cops through," Shurtleff said.

A closed drug-detox facility in Orem will house the program, and a nonprofit corporation is being formed to run the center, he said. Efforts so far are being fueled by \$20,000 in private donations.

Pleasant View Police Chief Scott Jackson went through the program. Jackson said he has no meth-related symptoms from his days as a drug cop, but volunteered for "the cure" to see if it's legitimate.

He's sold. Last month, he stood with Shurtleff at the Executive Development Institute, a conference in St. George for Utah law enforcement higher-ups, to fully endorse the program.

The 30-day program, developed in New York City four years ago for Sept. 11 Ground Zero workers, typically costs as much as \$5,000 per person.

But Utah's officers and firefighters plagued with meth-related maladies will go through it free of charge, Shurtleff said.

"Absolutely," he said. "I've committed to that. They're sick because of the job they were willing to do for us, and I don't think it's appropriate to charge them for treatment."

More than 50 ailing Utah police officers -- including three of the original five members of the Weber-Morgan Narcotics Strike Force -- have workers' compensation claims pending with the state over meth exposure.

Three claimants died last summer, their attorneys have said. It is estimated that more than 80 former narcotics officers around the state have been stricken with respiratory, nerve and other problems, including cancers, believed linked to meth.

Officers tearing down meth labs have donned air tanks and fully enclosed Tyvek "moon suits" as standard practice only in the last five to 10 years.

The Utah Legislature in 2006 set aside \$500,000 for a two-year study by the University of Utah on the ailing meth-exposed for causality and incidence of ailments compared with the general population.

Shurtleff led a brief December seminar at the West Valley City Police Department to introduce officers to principals in the New York rescue workers detox program. More than 150 officers showed up.

That's where Jackson volunteered to go through the detox program. He got the nod over two other volunteers, probably, he said, because he headed up the Kane County drug strike force in the 1990s.

The rescue workers detox center was set up a few blocks from the site of and in response to the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, funded with a huge donation from actor Tom Cruise, a Scientologist.

The program was actually developed by Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard, but officials have stressed it is not an arm of the church.

The program is described as a combination of exercise, sauna time and consumption of enormous amounts of fluids, especially water, plus different oils and various vitamin and nutrient supplements in liquid form.

Shurtleff said more than 800 Ground Zero police officers, firefighters and others have been successfully treated by the program in New York City. He visited it in January.

"I don't know any group more cynical than cops," Shurtleff said. "And I talked to about 15 of them, and they were all blown away by it."

The tab for Jackson's trip to the Big Apple was covered by the detox program itself.

It was 27 days straight, six hours a day, he said.

"We called it 'chasing the ground hog,' " he said, taken from the movie "Ground Hog Day" in which the protagonist lives the same day over and over.

The roughly 20 people who went through the treatment with him were all sick, he said, unlike himself. "I almost felt guilty ... but I saw drastic improvements in all those I went through with. I was totally impressed."

He said the two gallons of water a day, plus all the supplements, sweating and exercise, led to seeing the colored sweat and stained towels as advertised by the program's proponents at the December meeting.

Among those Jackson met was a 41-year-old police lieutenant who walked out of one of the World Trade Center towers just before it collapsed. He had been buried in dust, leading to 12 days in a hospital.

He initially couldn't walk a flight of steps without losing his breath and was using an inhaler and taking various medications.

"At first, he was coughing up what he said tasted like cement dust, and this is six years later," Jackson said. "But two weeks into the program, he was off all his meds and could ride a bicycle again."

Jackson is writing endorsement letters to Utah police chiefs and sheriffs, law enforcement groups and trade journals about his Jan. 23-Feb. 23 experience in the rescue workers detox program.

Shurtleff in December said he had been given hope by some in the Utah Legislature's leadership that money could be appropriated for the treatment program.

But that boiled down to an invitation to apply for grants available from existing state programs for treatment of meth addiction, he said. "We'll just keep doing our own fundraising."

Shurtleff said some of the money raised will go toward the Orem building's \$2,000-a-month lease and to fund training in New York for a former Orem addiction-treatment counselor, Bart Robinson, who will head the center.