

Meth treatment centers welcome and needed

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While the 2007 Legislature in Helena wrestles with conflicting views over budgets, taxes and just about everything else, one of the fruits of the 2005 session became a reality on Tuesday.

It's the Elkhorn Treatment Center, the Corrections Department's new, 40-bed facility for treating women convicted of methamphetamine-related crimes.

The scheduled arrival Tuesday of the first residents of the center marks a significant development in the way Montana deals with people addicted to meth.

Thanks to the giant ad campaign of the Montana Meth Project and its chief benefactor, Tom Siebel, the state has for a couple of years now sought to address the front end of the meth epidemic by educating people — mostly *young* people — about the perils of using meth even one time.

With the opening of the Elkhorn Center in Boulder and a larger men's facility coming in June to Lewistown, the state begins to address the other end of the problem, the person already addicted to the illegal, dangerous and widely available drug.

Up until now, much of the blame for a burgeoning prison population in Montana — including at the regional detention center on Gore Hill — has been put on meth.

Further, meth-addicted inmates tend to have more medical problems than the general inmate population, and they have a higher tendency to offend again.

In short, it had become apparent that simply locking up meth addicts was not a rational long-term solution to the problem.

Convinced by data showing that intensive treatment programs succeed where more conventional corrections programs do not, the 2005 Legislature authorized creation of the treatment centers.

There was an open house at Elkhorn Monday, and the first six residents were scheduled to arrive there Tuesday.

About 20 staff members there have been trained, and the facility will handle up to 40 residents at a time.

A typical treatment program will include nine months at the center followed by six months at a pre-release center.

Staff members at the 80-bed men's facility under construction in Lewistown expect to receive their first residents June 1. An open house is set there May 30.

In a related development in Helena, funding for treatment *courts*, which will work in tandem with the new treatment centers, remained in the state budget as of Tuesday; we hope lawmakers will keep it there and give a fair chance to this new approach to a growing problem.

It's important to remember in this discussion that the treatment approach to meth and other addiction problems saves money in the long run.

[Back to What's New](#)