

Drug wars and cynicism

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

John P. Walters, director of the federal Office of Drug Control Policy, was in St. Louis this week, along with U.S. Attorney General Michael Mukasey. They came to attend an international conference called the National Methamphetamine Chemicals Initiative.

Missouri no doubt was chosen as the gathering place because of its unrivaled leadership in meth lab busts. The state accounted for more than 20 percent of the national total in 2007.

Walters and the attorney general boasted about what they see as progress in beating back the meth menace. They point to national surveys that show meth use by youngsters down 64 percent since 2001, while the number of lab seizures decreased 70 percent from 2004 to 2007.

The big news: a joint statement signed by representatives of the United States, Mexico and China. It contains a list of ways the nations plan to cooperate in controlling production and combating trafficking in so-called "precursor chemicals" - material cooked into methamphetamine.

These could prove to be fine accomplishments if they bring lasting progress, especially in light of the federal government's long-standing neglect of the meth problem. For years, Congress and regulators were cowed by the lobbying might of pharmaceutical companies and then by retail drug chains that resisted efforts to ban or restrict sales of pseudoephedrine.

Elsewhere, as the so-called "war on drugs" approaches its 37th anniversary, the news is not so hopeful.

The lion's share of federal anti-drug resources is devoted stemming supply through law enforcement, interdiction and work in foreign nations to disrupt traffickers. At best, the results are mixed. Even Walters' agency acknowledges that drug use in America, with all its associated pathologies, remains high.

Critics of the war on drugs long have argued that the war's emphasis should be shifted. Devoting more resources to treatment - especially of hard-core users - and less toward interdiction and enforcement would result not only in better management of drug dependency but also in more effective use of taxpayer money.

Few people have spent more time at the center of national drug policy than Walters, who has served as "drug czar" since December 2001. Before that, he was chief of staff to William Bennett, who was drug czar in the George H.W. Bush administration.

In a meeting with members of the Post-Dispatch editorial board, Walters said all the right things about the importance of treatment programs. He praised the role that drug courts have played in reducing drug use. Such courts monitor the progress of criminal drug abusers attempting to break their habits. The best ones recognize that it may take several attempts before some addicts break free from dependency.

Walters concedes that the demand for treatment programs far outstrips the resources available for them. He acknowledges that law enforcement has been a much higher budgetary priority.

He blames Congress for this, claiming that it has not funded treatment programs at the level requested by President George W. Bush. He says that cynicism is the great enemy of an effective drug policy, noting that many politicians and ordinary Americans believe treatment doesn't work. Further, he said, many Americans don't believe substance abusers to be worthy of public assistance.

Walters is right about one thing: Being drug czar is a difficult job, because he doesn't have the absolute power that the real czars had. Today's czars must take political risks and passionately sell unpopular truths. But just putting the best face on a failed system only breeds more cynicism.

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