

Actor helps 'sell' detox program

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Deseret News

Published: Monday, Sept. 21, 2009 9:37 p.m. MDT



Actor Vincent D'Onofrio of "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" speaks at a Sandy fundraiser for Utah Meth Cops Project. (Sandra Lucas, American Detoxification Foundation)

Having played one on TV for eight years, Vincent D'Onofrio has met his fair share of police officers.

As time has passed, the actor has come to see their battles as his battles.

D'Onofrio, who has played detective Robert Goren on "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" since 2001, was in Utah Friday in an effort to raise awareness of a local project aimed to help local law enforcement officers.

The Utah Meth Cops Project began in 2007 after Attorney General Mark Shurtleff went to New York looking for a way to "give back to law enforcement."

What he found was a detoxification program used to treat 9/11 responders and others who worked at ground zero that could also be used to treat law enforcement officers exposed to methamphetamine.

Utah is now one of three states that have the facilities to treat cops who have been exposed to meth. These officers are trained and equipped to deal with meth lab situations, but D'Onofrio said it is important to realize that these officers often walk into meth labs while responding to seemingly unrelated incidents.

"There's a call for a disturbance ... and they need to find someone in a room and suddenly they're in a meth lab," D'Onofrio said. "They can't leave, can't go back and get their special suits. They have to get everything under control and finish the job."

Al Acosta, a 13-year narcotics officer who underwent the program, said these uniformed officers are often equipped with very little. "At best they have rubber gloves," he said.

Regardless of what they are wearing, meth lab exposure takes its toll, causing a variety of symptoms ranging from aching joints to fatigue and irritability. The program has been used to

treat 56 officers in Utah, but there are still 120 officers on a waiting list and more still who may not even know the program exists.

"The key, since there is so much evidence of the officers suffering through the pain ... is to bring awareness so the project is more legitimate in the eyes of city and state and so the officers and their families know about the program," D'Onofrio said.

D'Onofrio sat down Friday alongside Acosta and J. Adler of the Federal Law Enforcement Officer's Association to discuss and promote the detoxification treatment, which they say has been "100 percent effective" thus far.

At this point, the issue is funding for the \$5,000-per-officer treatment. Until a two-year study can be completed proving meth exposure can lead to higher incidences of cancer as well as any number of other symptoms, the detoxification can't be covered by worker's compensation.

"The fact of it is, that we know these men go into labs, we know this is a dangerous environment, but we aren't recognizing these people are getting sick? That's illogical," said American Detoxification Foundation director Sandra Lucas, who helped develop the project with Shurtleff.

But D'Onofrio, Adler and Acosta said getting men to acknowledge they aren't well is also an issue. They said the urge to downplay symptoms and avoid the doctor is already a man's instinct, but it is amplified in law enforcement, where toughness is encouraged and problems are seen as weaknesses. Adler said he worked at ground zero for two months straight immediately following 9/11 but didn't have a doctor's check-up until 2005.

"The thing about it is these people do a job and they will do whatever's asked of them," Acosta said. "They don't come out and whine."

The ultimate goal, though, is to get the project to the point where the officers can be treated before there is anything to whine about.

"I would hope, in the future, that there's someone behind a desk logging the number of busts the officers go on and then say, 'Hey, you've been on five busts this month, you need to go detox,'" D'Onofrio said. "Treat them at stage one, before they can get to stage four."

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The original article source was published by Deseret New Publishing Company at this location: <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/705331633/Actor-helps-sell-detox-program.html>

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