

FACING THE METHAMPHETAMINE PROBLEM IN AMERICA

TESTIMONY OF CONGRESSMAN ED CASE
BEFORE THE HOUSE GOVERNMENT REFORM COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE, DRUG POLICY, AND HUMAN RESOURCES

July 18, 2003

Chairman Souder, Ranking Member Cummings, and members of this Subcommittee, good morning and aloha! I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on the crucial issue of Facing the Methamphetamine Problem in America.

General drug abuse, of course, has plagued many of our communities for decades. To target what is needed to prevent this abuse now and in the future, we must first understand what causes it and then focus our efforts on overcoming those causes. And uniquely, it is up to our federal government to take the lead on the issue as it is the only entity with the resources and ability to coordinate the indispensable multi-pronged approach to stamping out drug abuse. I commend Chairman Souder and Ranking Member Cummings for your leadership on this issue.

First, let's be clear. We know that the roots of drug abuse lie largely where educational and economic opportunity are lacking and the social and community fabric are torn. Thus, in the big picture and long term, our best efforts to stamp out drug abuse lie in fixing our economy, improving our schools, and strengthening our families and communities.

But where drug abuse has taken hold, there are four basic causes. The first is insufficient education of our young people on the danger of drugs before they start. The second is law enforcement's inability, usually because of lack of resources, to catch, prosecute and lock up the worst offenders, mainly the dealers. The third is a community's lack of community-wide involvement in prevention and elimination. The fourth is a lack of sufficient rehabilitation programs to give abusers a second chance and bring them back into society.

All of this is true in spades with the drug of the moment: methamphetamine. In the case of my home state of Hawai'i, it is the crystallized form better known as "ice."

Hawai'i was one of the first places in the country where the drug made its appearance; ice began arriving in Hawai'i in large amounts in 1985. Due to its highly addictive properties, as it is almost 90% pure in this form, Hawai'i now has the nation's highest rate of adults who have tried ice.

Deaths in Hawai'i attributed to ice have almost doubled in two years. Ice can be directly linked to 44% of the homicides and 90% of the child abuse cases in our state. Property crime rates have also experienced similar increases. The saddest and most alarming statistics are from the year 2000, when 6% of 12th graders, 5% of 10th graders, 2% of 8th graders, and 1% of 6th graders reported that they have tried a form of methamphetamine at least once. It is my belief that the trends and experiences of my state are all too soon spreading throughout our nation.

The scourge of ice is an absolute top priority in Hawai'i's immediate drug elimination efforts. On education, our schools and communities are increasingly focusing on working with our youth to show the devastation that ice can cause and is causing. Our law enforcement community is starting to focus much more on attacking ice dealers. All of our needs now include some elements of rehabilitation.

Most encouraging, whole communities are rising up across our state to say: yes, ice is our problem, and we must all be part of the solution. Kahalu'u on the Island of O'ahu was the first community to hold "ice breaker" meetings and start sign-waving efforts. In May of this year, the Island of Kaua'i held its first of five regional drug summits. My own home island, the Big Island of Hawai'i, recently kicked off an islandwide "Hugs Not Drugs" sign-waving campaign with over one thousand citizens from twenty-three communities and neighborhoods participating in the first event.

But so much more needs to be done to support these community efforts. The Federal Bureau of Investigation and Drug Enforcement Administration need to station a permanent agent on each island that currently does not have a federal presence in order to focus federal law enforcement efforts and assist in coordination with county police. I have advocated for an increase in funding for the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area program in Hawai'i in order to expand its current jurisdiction to include Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. And general coordination efforts, which are indispensable, are severely underfunded.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I want to reiterate my full-fledged support and the support of my state for the campaign to end drug abuse, and in particular to address the ice epidemic in Hawai'i. Many of Hawai'i's political leaders and members of our law enforcement community have long worked on this issue, but additional federal resources and support are needed in this fight so we can overcome the plague of ice and work to eliminate the abuse of other harmful drugs as well.

I look forward to working with all of you on this issue. Mahalo, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity to address the Subcommittee.

###