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Fetal alcohol hits S.D. hard

Education seen as key solution

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Sen. Tim Johnson listened Friday to officials from the University of South Dakota Center for Disabilities describe the challenges of studying and preventing fetal alcohol spectrum disorders as tight budgets constrain their ability to understand the scope of a problem that seems to afflict South Dakota more than other states.

In 2007, Johnson introduced the Advanced FASD Research, Prevention and Services Act. If passed, it would charge the National Institutes of Health with bringing resources to bear against fetal alcohol spectrum disorders.

Absent that mandate, South Dakota competes for a smaller pool of NIH funding needed to study the prevalence of FASD in the state and to educate health care providers, said Kristin Blaschke, the disabilities center's development director.

A study done with Minnesota, North Dakota and Montana suggests ongoing work is needed, said Judy Struck, the center's executive director. It found 20 percent of mothers drank alcohol during some stage of pregnancy, and children affected by fetal alcohol disorders often are not diagnosed until ages 8 to 12.

"Is it fair to say we are raising a generation of brain-disabled young people as long as the fetal alcohol problem continues?" Johnson asked.

"That's a heavy statement," Struck said. She added that while evidence is too scarce to be conclusive, "I think South Dakota has a bigger issue than some other states."

Struck also told Johnson that while fetal alcohol disorders frequently are associated with the state's tribal reservations, it is more widespread. Women who drank during pregnancy typically used other drugs, as well, she said.

Austin Winberg, a study project director, said a component of the fetal alcohol disorders inquiry in nearby states involved attempting to persuade women to stop or reduce drinking during pregnancy, and 76 women did so for a 90-day period.

While disabilities center officials stressed the need for research funding, educating women in communities statewide also is crucial. Johnson said education and alcohol intervention services are being paired with the federal Women, Infants and Children nutrition program.

He also said health care reform legislation making its way through Congress would insure more Americans, and that will improve the delivery of information about the dangers of drinking during pregnancy, early diagnosis of fetal alcohol disorders and treatment. The issue also is receiving increased attention in Congress, he said.

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