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Johnson Introduces Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders Bill

Washington, DC—U.S. Senator Tim Johnson (D-SD) has introduced *The Advancing FASD Research, Prevention, and Services Act* to improve research, prevention, and services for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD). Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) joined Johnson and others in introducing the bill, which has the support of many South Dakota groups and advocates, including the University of South Dakota Center for Disabilities in Sioux Falls and the Cheisman Foundation in Rapid City.

“This disease is entirely preventable, and yet it is estimated that nearly 8,000 South Dakotans are living with FASD,” said Johnson. “While there is no known cure, the bill I introduced today seeks a balance between directing federal resources to prevention activities and to services for individuals living with FASD and their families.”

FASD is an umbrella term that describes a range of physical and mental birth defects that can occur in a fetus when a pregnant woman drinks alcohol. Alcohol exposure during pregnancy is a leading cause of non-hereditary cognitive disability.

The legislation contains provisions to require the National Institutes of Health to develop a research agenda, improve the ability to screen and identify disorders, and facilitate the development of statewide systems and community partnerships. The bill would also provide federal grants for pilot projects to determine and implement the best practices for educating children with FASD within the school system, as well as educating professionals about services for children. Federal grants would also be made available to states, tribes, tribal organizations and other non-profit organizations to develop support services such as vocational training, housing assistance, and medication monitoring services for adults with the disease.

“The bill introduced by Senator Johnson is truly landmark legislation. This act provides a strong foundation from which a comprehensive approach to addressing the staggering current issues of FASD, as well as preventing future issues from prenatal alcohol consumption, can develop,” said Judy Struck, Executive Director of the USD Center for Disabilities.

“The citizens of South Dakota could benefit from this bill, as it would provide assistance to organizations that conduct research of FASD best practices in schools and services as well as collecting prevalence data in South Dakota. The Chiesman Foundation’s FASD Center recently conducted a roundtable on FASD. Input from parents, teachers, and service providers indicated that more support services and coordination of services were necessary to intervene with the issues surrounding FASD,” said Helen Usera, Project Director for the Cheisman Foundation’s FASD Center.

Johnson held a roundtable discussion in Sioux Falls to discuss the prevention of FASD and how the lives of those with the disorders can be improved. People affected with these disorders face numerous medical, physical, educational, and financial challenges. Difficulties can include severe learning disabilities, physical abnormalities, costly medical bills, and behavioral impairments. Diagnoses under the FASD umbrella include Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Alcohol-Related Birth Defects and Alcohol-Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder.

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