

Sen. Johnson says there's hope in battle against fetal alcohol

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For nearly an hour today, Sen. Tim Johnson listened to officials from the University of South Dakota Center for Disabilities describe the challenges of studying and preventing fetal alcohol spectrum disorders.

Then he turned to aide Matt Varilek.

“Matt, will you bring in the bags of money?” Johnson said.

The moment of levity broke up the room. But it also suggested Johnson was sympathetic to the tale of disabilities center executive director Judy Struck and others that tight budgets constrain their ability to fully understand the scope of a problem that seems to afflict South Dakota more than other states and to intervene to treat it or prevent it.

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 FASD. 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, the disabilities center’s development director Kristin Blaschke said.

A study done with Minnesota, North Dakota and Montana suggests ongoing work is needed, Struck said. Its result disclosed 20 percent of mothers drank alcohol during some stage of pregnancy, and children affected by FASD are often 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.

Struck paused. “That’s a heavy statement,” she said then 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 FASD is frequently associated with the state’s tribal reservations, it is more widespread. The study done with the nearby states did not correlate rates of FASD to income, she said.

Women who drank during pregnancy typically used other drugs, as well, according to Struck. Johnson asked about methamphetamine used in combination with alcohol.

“We saw a lot a few years ago. It seem to have dropped off,” said Shelly Grinde, director of services and support.

Austin Winberg a study project director, said a component of the FASD inquiry involved attempting to convince women to stop or reduce drinking during pregnancy, and 76 women did so for a 90-day period. Some of those women, who assumed their alcohol consumption was average, were surprised to find they drank far in excess of national norms. Winberg told Johnson about one woman who admitted to drinking a gallon of whiskey a day.

While disabilities center officials stressed the need for research funding, taking information learned about identifying and treating FASD to women in communities throughout the state is also crucial. Johnson said education and alcohol intervention services are being paired with the federal Women, Infants and Children nutrition program.

“That can happen soon,” he said.

Johnson also pointed out 31 million Americans without health insurance will be covered in health care reform legislation making its way through Congress. That will improve the delivery of information about the dangers of drinking during pregnancy, the early diagnosis of children affected with FASD and their treatment.

“So there’s hope.”

He said FASD “is receiving more and more attention is Congress.”