

Senate passes two bills aimed at FAS

JUNEAU — Two bills aimed at calling public attention to the devastating birth defects caused by Fetal Alcohol Syndrome passed the Alaska State Senate earlier this month.

Senate Concurrent Resolution 1 would establish the week of May 8-14, Mother's Day Week, as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Awareness Week. Senate Bill 175 would require the posting of signs in bars, liquor stores and many restaurants, warning that drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause birth defects.

"My main goal with these two bills is to educate the public about the harm that can be caused to an unborn child by drinking," said Sen. John Binkley, R-Bethel.

FAS is a condition of mental, physical and behavioral defects that may develop in a fetus when the mother drinks alcohol during pregnancy.

Medical authorities in Alaska believe FAS is the number one cause of mental retardation in this state. The condition is of special concern to the Alaska Native population since more than 4 out of every 1,000 babies born to Alaska Natives have this defect — more than twice the national average, Binkley said.

In addition, authorities estimate that for every child born with FAS, 10 are

born with Fetal Alcohol Effects, less severe, but still debilitating birth defects.

"What is so tragic about FAS is that there is no cure for it, yet it is completely preventable — simply by avoiding alcohol during pregnancy," Binkley said.

The legislation calling for alcohol warning signs would be similar to existing *NO SMOKING* signs. These would be posted in all establishments that sell or dispense alcohol. They would read:

WARNING: Drinking alcoholic beverages such as beer, wine, wine coolers and distilled spirits during pregnancy can cause birth defects.

Research conducted by the Senate Advisory Council indicates an estimated 29 babies with FAS are born in Alaska each year; of these, 26 survive the first year. Two to 15 times this many babies are born with the lesser set of symptoms known as FAE. The lifetime cost for each FAS birth in Alaska is conservatively estimated at \$1.4 million.

Almost every FAS child born has some form of mental retardation — the average IQ being 66. Almost every child or adult with FAS needs lifelong care, supervision or support — either from the family or society.

"Few, if any, families can pay the

enormous costs of supporting an FAS child or adult," Binkley said. "The burden is usually assumed by government in Alaska at a cost of nearly \$40 million a year. When you add in the Fetal Alcohol Effects babies, the cost is staggering — more than \$100 million a year!"

Not included in these figures are the costs for treating medical problems commonly associated with FAS babies: blindness and deafness, kidney problems, club foot and cleft palate, and even spina bifida.

FAS children and adults are also at high risk for physical and sexual

abuse. Many suffer from depression, are suicidal and a few become violent. None of the costs associated with these problems are included.

Binkley said the alcohol warning signs legislation is supported by the State Office of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Board, the March of Dimes, the Alaska Native Health Board, the National Education Association-Alaska, the Alaska Women's Lobby, the Alaska Council on Prevention of Alcohol and Drug Abuse, the Tanana Chiefs Conference and the Rural Alaska Community Action Program's Village Participation Conference.