

Binkley introduces FAS legislation

JUNEAU — What happens if you're pregnant and abusing alcohol? You may be causing damage to your unborn child, and you could find yourself before a judge, facing court-ordered alcohol treatment, under a bill filed by Sen. John Binkley, R-Bethel.

Binkley has introduced a package of bills targeting alcohol-related birth defects in the areas of education and public awareness, medical professionals and teacher training, and treatment of pregnant women who use and abuse alcoholic beverages.

"Although we have made progress in recent years in educating the public about the dangers of drinking during pregnancy," Binkley said, "we still have a long way to go."

One bill in the package would provide for involuntary commitment to a treatment center of a pregnant woman who is alcoholic and who, "unless committed, is likely to harm the fetus by continued use of alcohol."

Binkley expects this bill will generate a fair amount of discussion.

"It's time we put the issue squarely on the table," he said. "There will always be that handful of people who won't — or can't — follow medical advice about drinking and pregnancy. Those who continue to grossly abuse alcohol and know that their babies will be born with horrible, irreversible birth defects must be provided treatment."

Children born with Fetal Alcohol

Syndrome suffer from growth retardation, facial malformations and nervous system damage. FAS also is now the number one cause of mental retardation in the nation.

"The children of these women pay a great cost with their lives," Binkley said, "And society picks up the tab."

The cost to care for an Alaska FAS child over his or her lifetime is conservatively estimated at more than \$1.4 million.

"Where do we stop just being frustrated about this situation and start making changes in society's level of tolerance?" Binkley asked.

A major obstacle to mandating treat-

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ment of any sort has been a lack of treatment facilities for pregnant women. The Indian Health Service is now completing plans for a 15- to 20-bed facility in the Anchorage area, which will serve Native women who are pregnant and abusing alcohol and drugs.

Treatment for pregnant non-Native women also is being considered. Binkley will be working closely with the Department of Health and Social Services in an effort to get state funds for these services in the Fiscal Year 1991 budget.

And to help assure that these women do get treatment, Binkley has introduced a bill that would establish a priority among state-funded treatment programs for pregnant women who abuse alcohol.

Other bills in Binkley's "FAS package" target increased efforts in public education. Mail order shipments of alcohol would have to include a brochure which tells about the dangers of drinking during pregnancy.

Students participating in the state's student loan program and attending vocational programs in alcohol-related fields would receive education about FAS and a related syndrome, Fetal Alcohol Effects, under another bill.

Couples requesting a marriage license also would be provided an educational brochure.

State medical associations for both doctors and nurses would be asked to sponsor continuing medical education opportunities in alcohol-related birth defects under a resolution in the package. A second resolution calls on the governor to declare Mother's Day Week as "Alcohol-Related Birth Defects Awareness Week."

School districts and Regional Education Attendance Areas would be required to provide training for teachers in ways to work with children with alcohol-related disabilities.

"Alaska's statistics about FAS are alarming," Binkley said. "But what those statistics tell us is there are a whole lot of kids out there who are already in trouble. What are we doing to help them cope with today's world?"

"What are we doing to prepare teachers to help these kids survive in our competitive, fast-paced life?"

The IHS has been collecting data on the incidence of FAS among Alaska Natives for several years now, and the most recent figures are 4.2 per 1,000 live births. Altogether, health care professionals estimate that 29 FAS babies are born in Alaska each year, but they concede the actual number is much higher.

Binkley also plans to work for funding in the FY 91 budget for a statewide six-month study of newborns. This study would anonymously identify the incidence of alcohol and drugs at birth. The data would not identify FAS

specifically, but it would provide the foundation for a statewide data base on alcohol and drug use by pregnant women.

Data collection also would be enhanced by a bill in Binkley's FAS package. FAS would become a reportable condition, as is the case with measles or rabies.

The information, reported to the state epidemiologist by physicians, is confidential and would only be used as a collective data tool for health planners and educators.

"Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is everyone's problem — regardless of sex or age or race — and every Alaska ought to be involved in the solutions," Binkley said.
