

Editorial



Fighting FAS in Alaska

Love, patience, special education programs. . . None of these things can solve the horrible consequences of a baby whose mother drank alcohol during her pregnancy.

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome — FAS — is the leading known cause of mental retardation in the nation, outranking Down's syndrome and spina bifida. It is the only major birth defect that is completely preventable by abstinence during pregnancy.

FAS babies are born tiny, and they never catch up. Their heads appear abnormally small, their facial features flat. They show some degree of mental retardation, along with other central nervous system problems.

State officials are making a special effort right now to educate Alaskans about this terrible, heartbreaking problem. In addition, Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, recently wrote about this subject in an article for the *Tundra Times* and a front page story this week details his success in getting approval from a Senate panel for funding of a residential treatment center for pregnant Alaska Native women.

According to a state information packet on FAS and the less severe Fetal Alcohol Effects, the incidence of FAS among Alaska Natives is 4.2 cases for each 1,000 live births, or about 12 FAS Native births each year.

The FAS rates among Alaska Natives range from a low of about 2.1 FAS cases per 1,000 births in Southeastern Alaska, 3.5 in the Yukon-Kuskokwim area, 3.8 in Southcentral Alaska, 4.0 in Western Alaska to a high of about 5.9 in the Interior. The overall Alaska rate is 2.2 per 1,000 live births, putting Alaska first among the 50 states.

No one has studied the incidence of FAS among the non-Native population in Alaska, forcing researchers to rely on the national estimate of 1.7 per 1,000 births. One non-Native has given birth to seven FAS children, however, the highest number recorded in the state, so relying on the national average may be conservative.

We support the state's new effort to get out information on this subject, and we're pleased Stevens is supporting programs at the federal level.

This is the sort of gut-wrenching problem that will only be solved by people working together, very hard, over a very long time.

