

Senator Lee, members of the committee, my name is Carl Young. I am the Executive Director of FASD-ND. Formerly known as Family Services Network, Inc. We are a small organization that supports families across North Dakota. From the oil fields of the Bakken to the Red River Valley, no part of our state is untouched by Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. I will reference the disorder as FASD throughout the remainder of my testimony.

If I may begin with a brief education about just what FASD is. FASD is an umbrella diagnosis much like Autism Spectrum Disorder that encompasses a number of diagnoses. These diagnoses include fetal alcohol syndrome, partial fetal alcohol syndrome, and alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorder. More than 50 years ago clinicians made the link between alcohol consumption and developmental delays caused during the pregnancy this is where the first references to "Fetal Alcohol Syndrome" can be found. While it is still a diagnosis under the umbrella term of FASD, it does not include a significant number of those individuals affected by exposure to drugs in the womb.

Why FASD? Why not opioid spectrum disorder or meth spectrum disorder? Alcohol is more harmful on the developing embryo than any drug you buy on the street today. Most birth moms that we have communicated with were drinking up until they discovered that they were pregnant. From the moment of conception, alcohol consumed will harm the developing baby. No amount of alcohol is safe. The THC in cannabis is far less harmful to the developing baby.

As research evolves, I can only imagine that additional discoveries will be made, and other diagnoses will be added to the umbrella.

For years, we have struggled with finding adequate supports for children born substance exposed. Often parents pull from a myriad of services for other disorders or mental health conditions. I know some pediatricians who refuse to give a diagnosis of FASD because of the lack of services available for the child and their family. Instead, the child is given a diagnosis of Autism.

FASD is two times more common than autism spectrum disorder. For example, if the average classroom size in North Dakota is 25 students, (at least in the larger communities) this would mean that 1 child in every classroom likely has some degree of FASD. Most of those children are undiagnosed. If everyone in North Dakota who has FASD were properly diagnosed, it would rival the population of the city of Mandan in size.

Schools struggle with behaviors in the children under their care. I propose that at least a portion of those children have FASD and are exhibiting symptoms of the disorder, and not behaviors. Changing how we view those with FASD, and understanding that these children are displaying symptoms will change how we treat them. It can change how their peers treat them.

Recently in a conversation with a school administrator, he indicated that there were likely at least 3 kids in his care that might have FASD. Not based on facial features. But based on their symptoms. FASD harms the prefrontal cortex. It limits Executive Function. It disables that internal voice that says "don't do this". As a result, you have a child with impulse control issues, a strong fight or flight instinct, and limited social emotional abilities. They have a difficult time relating to their peers, and can present to be much more functional than they actually are.

In the foster care system, I hear from families that struggle. The result is that the foster child is bumped from home to home. This causes great instability and a lack of trust. Most of the families that I work with are foster to adopt families.

As a parent of a child with FASD, I can tell you with certainty that the school to prison pipeline is an unmitigated success. Our son was diagnosed at age 15. Because he lacked the facial features that were in the initial diagnostic criteria for FAS, he was given the diagnosis of prenatal alcohol exposure. He is 21 currently and housed at the Cass County jail in Fargo. Prior to that, he was in prison for arson. He has had more than a dozen charges in the last 3 years, including 6 felonies. We don't excuse his behaviors.

We blame his symptoms. To quote him, "Dad, I can't get support. Most don't have what they call the capacity to help me." In addition because of the felony convictions, he has a difficult time finding adequate employment and housing. Outside of prison and jail, he is homeless.

My son is 21 physically, developmentally he is about 10. It wasn't until he turned 19 that he was granted services through the states developmental disability system.

I have reviewed this bill at length since its inception. I would recommend a couple of small modifications if I may. First, the FASD Council should have a sunset clause. Give them 10 years. Second, Given the severity of this particular issue, I would add a Section 6 to the bill. Declare September 9th of each year as FASD Awareness Day across North Dakota.

I will stand for any questions.