

FASD coalition meets, swaps stories, ideas, makes plans

‘Alcohol and pregnancy don’t mix’

Joe McWilliams - Lakeside Leader

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“I would like a jacket,” said FASD worker Patty Gullion, at last week’s FASD Coalition meeting in Slave Lake, “that says, ‘Alcohol and pregnancy do not mix. Call me.’”

This was in the wants section of the meeting’s agenda, where attendees were invited to say what they thought would be helpful in the way of tackling the problems or challenges of FASD. FASD being Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. It’s been (and is being) recognized as a significant factor in learning and behavioural difficulties, among others.

In an ideal world, admitted meeting chair Angela Kemble, FASD wouldn’t exist, because pregnant mothers simply wouldn’t drink alcohol. However, in the real world it doesn’t work that way. Kemble is the executive Director of the Northwest Central Alberta FASD Network. She facilitates groups like this one all over her zone. Awareness and prevention education are within the mandate of her organization; so are assessments and diagnostic clinics; follow-up supports is the final piece.

On the awareness front, Gullion and the other ‘key workers’ (the term that’s used) are traveling around and trying to get the message across. Part of it is to not drink if you are pregnant. Another part is to help people understand about the condition, organize support for them, get them tested, and so on. There’s a lot of work to be done, but in her early efforts in some of the surrounding communities, she’s seeing some success.

“I’ve been pleasantly surprised by the response,” Gullion said. “They get it.”

Various ideas on raising awareness were brought up. One is via social media, which is being organized. Visits to remote communities is a big one, and that is being done by workers such as Gullion, plus WJS people – several of whom were at the meeting.

“My role is supporting the families,” said Patty Stephen of WJS, adding that she’s recently visited Chipewyan Lake and plans another trip to Wabasca, Sandy Lake, and Calling Lake “to see what’s going on there.”

Another presenter was Courtney Harrington of the WRAP (Wellness Resiliency and Partnerships in Schools), who works with FASD students at two local schools. That includes working with teachers and parents, raising awareness, coaching and getting down to the nitty gritty of helping individual students cope with social or academic difficulties.

“My referral list is growing by the week,” she said

One fairly common occurrence with FASD people is that they get frustrated and have ‘meltdowns.’ How to deal with such a person in a school setting or family setting is one thing; there are other occasions where the police get involved. It happens fairly frequently, said RCMP Staff Sgt. Chris Murphy, and it can be quite difficult to figure out what to do. For example, “A kid decides to ride his bicycle to Athabasca. We’re not putting those people in cells. We need an agency to help us.”

Also discussed and thought to be helpful would be a support network for people looking after FASD individuals. Kemble gave an example of one that has started in Athabasca that could serve as a model.

The group agreed to meet quarterly from now on.