

We Must Protect Children from Toxic Chemicals

By Gwen Lee, Executive Director of The Arc of Anchorage

Alaska is a unique and beautiful state in ways that usually make us proud. However, there are times when we stand out for reasons that are deeply disturbing. A baby in Alaska is twice as likely to be born with a birth defect than a child delivered anywhere else in the nation. Since birth defects are the leading cause of infant death and childhood disabilities, the state ends up spending more than \$2.5 billion a year in hospital costs to treat these kids, not to mention the care that a special-needs child will receive throughout the rest of his or her life.

I see many children and adults with developmental challenges each day. We at The Arc of Anchorage strive to help those with disabilities lead fulfilling lives in our community. But we are working to understand the potential causes of the challenges they face because it makes sense to prevent disabilities by eliminating their causes, if we can.

An increasing number of peer-reviewed scientific studies demonstrate that toxic chemical exposure is an important risk factor, not only for birth defects such as oral clefts, heart abnormalities, and under-developed brains, but also for other serious illnesses including cancer, asthma and reproductive problems.

Meanwhile, thirty-five years has gone by since Congress passed the Toxic Substances Control Act – our federal policy for regulating toxic chemicals. Only 200 of the more than 80,000 chemicals produced and used in the United States have been tested for safety. Only five chemicals have been regulated under the law. Products including lead, mercury, asbestos and formaldehyde are still allowed on the market even though we know they are dangerous to public health.

Alaska and the circumpolar Arctic are exposed to pesticides and industrial chemicals that originate from thousands of miles away, traveling northward via oceanic and atmospheric currents and eventually settling in cold climates. These chemicals accumulate in the north because the cold climate and fat-based food web favor retention of these persistent toxics.

Even toxic chemicals that have been banned in the U.S. (such as the insecticide DDT and class of industrial chemicals known as PCBs) continue to accumulate in the Arctic and sub-Arctic, putting our local population at risk. Some Arctic Indigenous populations have shown levels of contaminants in blood and breast milk that are higher than those found anywhere else on Earth.

Right now we have a chance to change our course and put in place common sense controls on the hazardous chemicals that are overburdening our state. U.S. Senator Lautenberg has introduced in Congress the “Safe Chemicals Act of 2011.” This law would strengthen our ability to ensure chemicals used in everyday products are safe.

States around the country have passed more than 70 chemical safety laws in the last nine years. While these laws are very important, they do not absolve Congress of its duty to keep children safe—nor, because of the long-range transport of chemicals in unregulated states, will it fully protect Alaska’s children. We need to establish a nationwide standard and give the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency effective enforcement powers to ensure that products are safer in every state and every store.

Most products sold in the U.S. must be proven safe before they are allowed on the market. Cars have to pass safety tests. Homes undergo inspections. It is common sense to require chemical companies to demonstrate that their products are safe before consumers buy them.

We need to establish laws that regulate chemicals that cause neurological damage, cancer, genetic harm, endocrine disorders, or harm to the immune system. Children are especially vulnerable to the harmful effects of chemicals, and we should do everything we can to protect them.

If we do not act now, we will face grave consequences in the health of future generations. We need to give a voice to our children and grandchildren and stand up against harmful pollutants that could destroy their chance at a better life. Together we can urge Alaska's Senators to protect our families by supporting the Safe Chemicals Act of 2011. We have no time to waste.

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