

# Manitoba's Renewed FASD Strategy

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2024-2029

## Part I: Overview

The Manitoba government's renewed Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Strategy builds on the success of current FASD programming to improve supports for people impacted by FASD.

The 2024-2029 renewed FASD Strategy will prioritize investment in community awareness, wrap-around supports for pregnant people and families, and increased specialized support for people with FASD across the lifespan. These investments will address adverse health and wellbeing outcomes disproportionately faced by people with FASD and people who use alcohol during pregnancy.

The renewed FASD Strategy will be rooted in the following principles:

- Centre the voices of people with lived and living experience
- Advance reconciliation and increase Indigenous-led service provision
- Ensure service quality
- Reduce stigma and promote dignity

The Manitoba government currently invests \$15.5 million annually in the FASD Strategy. The Manitoba government plans to develop new and expanded FASD initiatives throughout the five years of the renewed strategy.

## Part II: Background

### Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

FASD is the most common developmental disability in Canada, impacting approximately four per cent of Canadians, or approximately 58,000 Manitobans. FASD impacts more people than Autism Spectrum Disorder, Cerebral Palsy, Down Syndrome, and Tourette's syndrome combined<sup>1</sup>.

FASD is a medical term used to describe the impacts of prenatal exposure to alcohol on a person's brain and body. FASD is a lifelong disability. Individuals with FASD may experience challenges in their daily living, and may need support with motor skills, physical health, learning, memory, attention, communication, emotional regulation, and/or social skills<sup>1</sup>.

All people with developmental disabilities, including FASD, are unique and have many gifts and strengths. Manitoba supports people with disabilities to live full and satisfying lives in their communities: to make their own decisions, to have opportunities to work towards their goals, and to access the right amount of support needed to be happy and healthy.

With the right supports, people with FASD can thrive. However, when people with FASD do not receive the support they need, they are more likely to experience adverse outcomes such as poor educational achievement, criminal justice system involvement, violence, exploitation, mental health disorders, substance use disorders, unemployment, housing instability, and poor connections to health and social services.

## Alcohol Use During Pregnancy

There is no known safe amount of alcohol use at any stage of pregnancy. The safest option during pregnancy or when planning to become pregnant is to not drink alcohol. It is never too late for a pregnant person to take steps towards a healthier pregnancy, including stopping or reducing alcohol use. Partners, families, and communities have an important role to play to support pregnant people towards greater health and well-being.

It is estimated alcohol is consumed during 10 to 15 per cent of pregnancies in Canada<sup>2</sup>. There are many reasons why someone may drink alcohol during pregnancy, including being unaware they are pregnant, experiencing addiction, experiencing abuse or trauma, and not knowing the impact alcohol can have on pregnancy.

It is essential to approach alcohol use in pregnancy with understanding and compassion. Stigma and judgment towards people who use alcohol in pregnancy are a significant barrier to people seeking the support and services they need. Preventing FASD involves both sharing accurate information about the risks of alcohol use in pregnancy in ways that do not shame or blame, and providing wrap-around services to support people who are pregnant and use substances.

## The FASD Strategy and Manitoba Government Priorities

Manitoba's FASD Strategy was first implemented in 2007. The FASD Strategy ensures that all programs and initiatives, across all areas of government and community partners, are working together to support people impacted by FASD and alcohol use in pregnancy.

The work of the FASD Strategy intersects with many government priorities, highlighting the need for collaboration with strategic initiatives in the following areas:

**Maternal and Child Health:** People served by FASD prevention programs have higher rates of prenatal health care, with earlier intervention, as well as higher uptake of the Manitoba Prenatal Benefit and other community supports<sup>3</sup>. FASD prevention initiatives also provide education about reproductive health and FASD to reduce the risk of alcohol-exposed pregnancies.

**Gender-Based Violence:** Research shows that individuals who use substances in pregnancy may also be vulnerable to experiencing gender-based violence<sup>4</sup>. Individuals with FASD experience increased vulnerability to sexual violence and exploitation<sup>5</sup>.

**Suicide Prevention and Reduced Child Mortality:** Children and youth with FASD have higher rates of suicidality than the general population<sup>6</sup>. Adapted mental health supports must be available for people with disabilities including FASD.

**Public Safety:** People with FASD are over-represented in the criminal justice system<sup>7</sup>. Early intervention for youth with FASD is essential, including access to diagnostic assessments, support through the court system to understand how FASD impacts behaviour, and wrap-around supports to reduce criminal activity.

**Homelessness:** People with disabilities including FASD are at greater risk of housing instability and homelessness, and benefit from adapted housing supports<sup>8</sup>.

**Disability Supports:** People with FASD need to have a voice in the disability supports they can access, which includes supports to succeed in the workforce.

**Child Welfare:** Youth with FASD are over-represented within the child welfare system and may need specialized support while in care and during the transition out of care<sup>9</sup>. This includes ensuring access to diagnostic assessment and support services.

**Reconciliation:** FASD occurs in all societies where alcohol is consumed, regardless of race or ethnicity. However, we need to understand the context of alcohol use in order to best support families and communities impacted by FASD. Within Indigenous communities, colonization and residential schools have caused harm and lasting impacts to health and wellbeing, including addiction and substance use. Manitoba's FASD Strategy must address these realities and seek reconciliatory action.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has two Calls to Action that specifically address FASD; Call to Action #33 calls for culturally appropriate FASD prevention programs, and #34 calls for criminal justice system reforms to better address the needs of people with FASD in the justice system. Other Calls to Action are also related to supporting individuals impacted by FASD, such as calls for culturally appropriate health care provision, training in cultural competency for public servants and service providers, and improved outcomes for maternal and child health, mental health, and addictions.

## **Current Manitoba FASD Initiatives**

Manitoba government departments work together on the FASD Interdepartmental Committee (FASD-IC) to guide the work of Manitoba's FASD Strategy. The FASD-IC ensures that all departments are working together to effectively coordinate services and supports for people impacted by FASD and alcohol use in pregnancy.

In 2023/24, Manitoba invested \$15 Million into FASD initiatives, including:

**FASD Diagnosis:** FASD diagnostic assessment services are available to children and youth ages 0-17 in all regions of Manitoba.

**FASD Prevention:** Manitoba funds programming, including mentorship and connection to needed community resources, for individuals who are pregnant or have young children and use substances. These programs reduce the risk of alcohol exposure during pregnancy and FASD. Counselling is also available for youth and adults to learn more about health impacts of alcohol use, including the risks of alcohol use during pregnancy. Counsellors support Manitobans to make self-determined goals around alcohol and birth control use.

### **Support for individuals with FASD and their families across the lifespan:**

Relationship-based support, education, networking, and respite/recreational programming is available for children and youth with FASD and their families. Individualized supports are available for youth and adults with FASD or confirmed prenatal alcohol exposure who are not eligible for other disability supports. Classroom support is available for K-12 students in Manitoba with disabilities including FASD. Support, diagnostic coordination, addictions programming, and an adapted court docket are available for youth and young adults with FASD who are involved in the justice system.

**Awareness and training:** Manitoba funds initiatives that are committed to FASD education, advocacy, and centring the voices of individuals with lived and living experience. Community members and service providers across Manitoba can access accurate information about FASD and alcohol use during pregnancy through training, print resources, networking, and opportunities to learn from individuals with FASD.

For more information on FASD programs in Manitoba, visit [www.gov.mb.ca/fs/fasd/](http://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/fasd/).

## Community Engagement

In the spring of 2021, the Manitoba government engaged with community partners with the goal of setting renewed strategic priorities for the provincial FASD Strategy. In total, over 360 community partners provided feedback, which is summarized in a [What We Heard Report](#).

Community partners placed a high priority on training and resource sharing, promoting socio-cultural awareness and knowledge of FASD, and capacity-building for individuals and organizations providing services to individuals with FASD. Community partners also emphasized the importance of addressing stigma and promoting dignity for individuals with FASD and those who use alcohol during pregnancy.

Community partners recognized the value and positive impact of existing FASD programs in Manitoba and recommended increasing program capacity and eligibility to support more people across Manitoba. The importance of providing supports in culturally relevant ways, using approaches rooted in Indigenous knowledges and practices, was also shared.

## PART III: Strategic Priorities

The renewed FASD Strategy will build on the success of existing Manitoba FASD initiatives and programs. New investment in the FASD Strategy will focus on addressing adverse health and well-being outcomes disproportionately faced by people with FASD and people who use alcohol during pregnancy. By prioritizing 'upstream' prevention, early intervention, and increased supports to mitigate risk factors, the FASD Strategy will work towards improved long-term health and well-being outcomes 'downstream' for Manitobans impacted by FASD and alcohol use in pregnancy.

### Guiding Principles

Manitoba's renewed FASD Strategy will be rooted in the following four principles:

**Centre the voices of people with lived and living experience** - Prioritize the perspectives of people who have used alcohol during pregnancy, people with FASD, and their families and communities. People with lived and living experience will be recognized as the experts, and their perspectives and input will be reflected in decision-making, program development, public messaging, research, and evaluation.

**Advance reconciliation and increase Indigenous-led service provision** - Manitoba's renewed FASD Strategy will act on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action #33 and #34. Indigenous peoples are disproportionately represented amongst people served by FASD prevention and support programs in Manitoba. The Manitoba government will strengthen relationships with Indigenous partners and ensure meaningful involvement in decision-making to enhance and increase Indigenous-led FASD prevention and support services.

The Manitoba government will continue to support the FASD Strategy Elders Circle, a group of Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Grandparents who meet regularly to provide guidance to the work of the FASD Strategy.

**Ensure service quality** - Develop and expand FASD initiatives using research and evaluation of best practice approaches. Equip service providers with the training, resources, and funding they need to provide high quality, FASD-informed services.

**Reduce stigma and promote dignity** - Recognize that stigma and judgment create barriers for people with FASD and people who use substances in pregnancy to access support and services. Dignity promotion must be prioritized within FASD awareness, prevention, and support efforts.

## Objectives

The renewed FASD Strategy will focus on improved outcomes for people with FASD, their families, and people who use substances in pregnancy. This will be achieved through new and expanded initiatives that aim to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) Community Awareness:** Develop partnerships with community networks to share accurate, non-stigmatizing information about FASD and alcohol use in pregnancy, centering voices of individuals with lived and living experience. Support for inclusive and culturally relevant training and information-sharing will increase the capacity of caregivers and service providers to effectively support people with FASD and people who use substances during pregnancy.
- 2) Wraparound Support for Pregnant People and Families:** Reduce alcohol use in pregnancy and risk of FASD by offering wraparound supports to pregnant people who use substances during pregnancy and their families. FASD prevention services will take a low-barrier, trauma-informed, culturally grounded, harm reduction-oriented approach. These services will collaborate with other health and social service providers to increase access to prenatal care, parenting supports, and addictions services, improving long-term health and well-being outcomes for at-risk pregnant people and parents.
- 3) Increase Specialized Support Across the Lifespan:** Increase timely access to FASD diagnostic services and supports through increased program capacity and availability across Manitoba. The renewed FASD strategy will increase and enhance comprehensive support services for children, youth, and adults with FASD and their families, addressing service gaps due to program capacity, eligibility, and/or geographic service area.

FASD initiatives will reduce the risk of future adverse outcomes by providing family support, crime and victimization prevention, educational and employment supports, mental health and addictions services, and housing support. These supports will improve long-term outcomes such as public safety, educational achievement, mental health, employment, housing stability, family wellness, and access to health and social services.

FASD program evaluation will measure these objectives as applicable; the government of Manitoba will use this data to inform FASD policy and program development.

## **PART IV: Conclusion and Next Steps**

Over the next five years, the Manitoba government will continue to develop FASD initiatives and programming to address strategic priorities. Manitoba will continue to collaborate with community partners, including individuals with lived and living experience, Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers, service providers, and FASD coalitions across Manitoba.

Manitoba's renewed FASD Strategy responds to the needs of Manitobans impacted by FASD and substance use during pregnancy by centering the voices of people with lived and living experience; advancing reconciliation and increasing Indigenous-led service provision; ensuring service quality; and reducing stigma and promoting dignity. Investing 'upstream' in community awareness, wrap-around supports for pregnant people and families, and increasing specialized support for people with FASD across the lifespan will improve outcomes for people impacted by FASD and substance use in pregnancy.

### **Questions?**

Please contact [FASDInfo@gov.mb.ca](mailto:FASDInfo@gov.mb.ca).

*This publication is available in alternate formats upon request.*

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