



Politics

Senate debates stillborn paid leave bill

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 Labor's Kristina Keneally says parents of stillborn babies also need paid parental leave. Credit: AAP



Employer-paid parental leave arrangements that ignore stillbirth help nobody, Labor's Kristina Keneally has told parliament.

Under the proposed Fair Work Act amendment debated in parliament on Monday, a pregnancy ending in stillbirth or a live birth would lead to the same access to parental leave support paid by employers.

"We often don't talk about the experiences of parents whose child is stillborn, what it means to be the parent of a child you don't get to bring home," Senator Keneally said.

"Parents of stillborn babies are parents too."

Her own daughter, Caroline, was stillborn more than 20 years ago.

Liberal senator Hollie Hughes told parliament her mother had seven miscarriages before she was born, including one carried to almost full-term, who was called Sally.

Financial pressure can mean mothers have to return to work before they are ready, and be physically present but mentally absent.

Senator Hughes encouraged all employers to provide extra support, given the trauma and grief of stillbirth.

"I promise you that loyalty to staff at that horrific time in their life will be repaid tenfold," she said.

"We need to bring this out in the open."

Six babies are lost to stillbirth each day, or about 2200 babies every year.

Labor senator Malarndirri McCarthy spoke about First Nation stillborn babies being left at morgues for years, with parents suffering alone.

The rate of death from stillbirth is higher than the national road toll, and stillbirth is the number one cause of death for infants in Australia.

Commonwealth parental leave pay already provides for parents of a stillborn baby to receive the same government-paid entitlements as the parents of a baby born live.

But a bipartisan Senate inquiry found employer-paid schemes that some workers get on top of federal entitlements bring "shadow" areas that create a gap in the intended employer-paid safety net.

Employment contracts can differ widely and often have no provisions for workers who have experienced a stillbirth, in contrast to leave and superannuation arrangements after a live birth, and managers have to decide what to do.

In one case, a mother gave evidence that she was required to return to work just 11 days after her baby's stillbirth.

"We don't often talk about stillbirths in our society," Senator Keneally said.

"It is too traumatic, it is tragic, it is raw."

The proposed Labor bill would make sure that an employer cannot cancel paid parental leave in the event of an employee experiencing a stillbirth.