

PIONEER PRESS



AT THE CAPITOL

Confirm life, parents say

The profound grief after a stillbirth might be eased a bit by the state if birth records were made, says bill's sponsor

BY RACHEL E. STASSEN-BERGER
Pioneer Press

On a June day five years ago, a pregnant Susan Lacek was getting ready for her baby shower.

But instead of celebrating the upcoming birth at a party, Lacek and her husband, Mark, went to Fairview Southdale Hospital and learned that the child, Faith, had died while still in the womb.

Since then, the Lacek family has prayed for young Faith, hung stockings for her at Christmas and displayed her photo next to those of their living children. But, Lacek told lawmakers Wednesday, her family lacks one key acknowledgement of Faith's existence — a birth certificate.

"How can we get a death certificate if we didn't get a birth certificate?" Lacek asked.

Lacek, who came to the House Health and Human Services Policy Committee on Wednesday, asked lawmakers to allow her and other grieving mothers of stillborn children the option of getting an official birth certificate. Current law allows those parents to get only a death certificate.



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Candy McVicar of Albertville, center, testifies before the Minnesota House Health and Human Services Policy Committee on Wednesday about the stillbirth of her daughter, Grace, and the need for parents to receive a birth certificate as well as a death certificate — the only record of the child now allowed. At far left is Rep. Karen Klinzing, R-Woodbury, sponsor of the bill; at right holding a portrait of McVicar, her husband and Grace is Sherokee Ilse of Orono, Minn., author of "Empty Arms," a book about parental bereavement.

The measure, sponsored by Woodbury Republican Rep. Karen Klinzing, passed the committee on a unanimous voice vote.

"My rationale for supporting

this bill is that grief is a really difficult thing for parents who are experiencing the death of an infant. Something that can really help in the process of dealing with the grief is a

record of mementos," Klinzing said.

She knows of that grief from personal experience, she said. Her 4-week-old son William died in 2003. He was born with a

severe birth defect.

About a dozen states recently have changed their laws to issue birth certificates for

CONFIRM LIFE, 3B

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stillbirths. Klinzing's proposal is modeled after laws enacted in Wisconsin and Arizona.

"Please help us add Minnesota to the growing list of states who chose to do the right and just thing," a tearful Candy McVicar asked lawmakers. McVicar told the representatives of her only child, Grace, who was delivered dead after "22 hours of horrible labor."

"The birth of a stillborn is no different than the birth of a living baby other than the fact that it is a silent birth with no reward given for the hours of hard work," McVicar said.

According to national statistics, there were about six fetal deaths after 20 weeks of pregnancy for each 1,000 live births in 2002.

But statistics belie the personal nature of the pain.

After the committee passed the birth certificate measure, Rep. Kurt Zellers, R-Maple Grove, appeared to testify on behalf of a tax-related measure.

"Before I start, as you know my wife and I lost a little girl ... Those of you who have been in this committee know that there are many things that are very impersonal. This is something that

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is very personal; it is a club that you don't want to belong to," Zellers said. "It means so much to those of us who are in the club that none of us want to be a part of."

Sen. Michele Bachmann, R-Stillwater, and Sen. Ellen Anderson, DFL-St. Paul, are sponsoring measures in the Senate that would allow parents to get birth certificates for stillborn children. Bachmann's measure is the companion to Klinzing's bill.

Anderson's measure is slightly different because she feared the language of the

Klinzing bill might mean the issue would get caught in the abortion debate. Her measure would specify that fetuses expelled through "induced termination of pregnancy" would not be considered stillborn.

But that might also mean that women who experienced stillbirths through induced labor might not be able to get birth certificates, said Tara Lundahl, whose daughter Sasha was delivered stillborn in 2003.

"That would exclude the majority of the people," said Lundahl who said she supports the Klinzing measure and abortion access. "We just want our children to be recognized as births. Period. It doesn't have to be so complicated."

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