

THE BALTIMORE BANNER

Small comfort for deep wounds: Grieving parents would receive \$1,000 under Maryland bill

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The one-time tax credit for families of stillborn babies could help defray unexpected costs, pain

Jessica Brady Reader was almost 38 weeks pregnant with her second daughter, Francesca, and the house was prepped for her arrival. Reader and her husband had assembled the bassinet, washed and folded onesies, and bought diapers, bottles and breastfeeding supplies.

Recounting that time years later, Reader is still moved to tears by the memory. Because in June 2021, during a routine appointment, Reader learned that Francesca had died.

After delivering her stillborn daughter, Reader was still in the hospital as she and her husband confronted the beginning of their grieving by sorting through funeral home information. The following year was one marred by painful milestones — first Halloween, first Christmas — including perhaps an unexpected one: first tax day.

“I do remember filing taxes in 2022 and when the question of the number of dependents that you had came up, feeling that little gut punch of having to answer one when in our family at the time we felt, and still feel, like we had more children than that,” Reader said. “To not have that recognized was just another moment of really feeling the pain of being a stillborn parent.”

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In February, Reader testified in favor of a state bill introduced by Maryland Sen. Jeff Waldstreicher [that would give a one-time tax credit](#) to parents of stillborn babies to help offset the costs they incurred while preparing to bring their children home — and the unexpected costs of burial or cremation. But for parent advocates, the recognition of their pain acknowledged by the bill is just as important as the financial help.

“My sense was that parents who go through these circumstances have such deep wounds, the least that state government could do would be to help a tiny bit to defray the financial costs that these parents went through,” said Waldstreicher, a Montgomery County Democrat and father of three. “I don’t think state government can ever provide closure to parents who go through this experience, but we can provide a small comfort, a small financial comfort, in the form of a stillbirth tax credit.”



Jessica Brady Reader brought hydrangeas to the hospital for Francesca's delivery; she keeps a vase with the flowers in her living room. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

If passed, the bill would allow parents to claim a refundable credit of \$1,000 against their state income tax. Starting in tax year 2026, parents could claim the credit in the year the stillbirth occurred. To qualify, parents would need a stillbirth certificate from the Maryland Department of Health or a certificate of fetal death from another state, which are given when a loss occurs after 20 weeks of pregnancy.

The bill would have a small financial impact, Waldstreicher said: While general revenue funds could decrease by about \$360,000 annually starting in fiscal year 2027, the comptroller's office could handle the new credit with its already budgeted resources, according to the bill's fiscal note.

In addition to the [federal child tax credit](#), Maryland parents are eligible for a [\\$500 state child tax credit](#), but only if they make an adjusted income of about \$15,000 or less. The proposed stillborn tax credit does not have an income restriction.

The bill drew six co-sponsors — five Democrats, one Republican — including the chair and vice chair of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee, where the bill was first read. The bill passed unanimously out of the full Senate and is headed for a Thursday hearing in front of the House Ways and Means Committee.

If the bill passes, Maryland would join [eight other states](#) that have tax credits or deductions for stillborn babies, according to the Star Legacy Foundation.

Becoming the ninth state to offer stillborn parents some relief would be an “incredibly amazing moment” said Lauren Petit, who is studying counseling for reproductive mental health. After having a stillbirth in July 2020, she contacted her then-state senator and now U.S. Rep. Sarah Elfreth because she’d seen other states pass stillborn tax credit legislation and wanted Maryland to do the same. Like many other parents, Petit had spent thousands of dollars furnishing a nursery for Ava, the daughter she lost.



From left, Lauren Petit with daughter, Cecilia, 2, and her husband, Max Petit with son, Miles, 1, as the family gets ready for the day at home. (Shannon Pearce for The Baltimore Banner)



Lauren Petit places her hand on a plaque in her backyard that marks where the family scattered Ava's ashes in 2020. The ring on her hand was specially designed to hold a citrine crystal to represent the month of November, when Ava was supposed to be born. (Shannon Pearce for The Baltimore Banner)

"It really does feel like another blow when it comes to tax time and your child really doesn't count," said Petit, who

has two children in addition to Ava. “It’s almost like they weren’t real, which is a really widespread experience for stillbirth parents.”

While the bill didn’t pass in 2022, Petit is advocating for the legislation again this session. She’s proud of herself and Reader for publicly testifying despite the shame and isolation that can come with being a stillborn parent. Both mothers want the state to do more to educate parents about and ultimately prevent stillbirths.

When Reader was preparing to testify before state senators, she decided on a “professional and detached mindset,” she said. She wanted to go in, make her best arguments, and convince members “who have to make serious and hard choices about our state’s budget” to pass the bill.

But once she started speaking, she was surprised by how emotional and difficult it was to relive “some of the most painful moments in my life.”

“I found that I was a mom. And that was what came forward most of all,” Reader said. “I also told Francesca that I would always fight for her. And I suppose in some way, that’s what I’m trying to do right now.”



Jessica Brady Reader wears a necklace with her daughter's name and birthstone.
(Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

About the Education Hub

This reporting is part of The Banner's Education Hub, community-funded journalism that provides parents with resources they need to make decisions about how their children learn. [Read more.](#)

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Maya Lora is an early childhood education reporter who covers how Maryland can best support young children and their families, from pregnancy through kindergarten, a critical stage in brain development.

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