

# After a stillbirth, she says she suffered another blow: No paid leave

**‘I will not give up this fight,’ the D.C. teacher says**



Elizabeth O'Donnell, 30, of Washington, D.C., had a stillborn delivery and now is being denied paid leave. (Photo by Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

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Elizabeth O'Donnell was seven months pregnant when she realized she was no longer feeling the baby move.

A Nov. 28 trip to the hospital delivered devastating news: Her daughter didn't have a heartbeat. Doctors couldn't tell her what happened.

O'Donnell, 30, gave birth to Aaliyah Denise four days later, holding her for about an hour as she admired how much black hair her daughter had, soaked in the features that reflected her partner's more than her own and reaffirmed her love to the child she won't see grow up. The 48-hour labor

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was difficult, O'Donnell said, and she lost about 1½ liters of blood. The epidural aggravated existing scar tissue, leaving her in constant pain.

Then, came news that made the difficult experience even tougher: Her employer — D.C. Public Schools — was denying her the [paid family leave](#) she would have gotten.

O'Donnell had already been granted paid leave that would have had her out for the rest of the school year, but once she gave birth, she notified her employer that she wouldn't need as much time. Instead, she was asking for eight weeks for postpartum recovery. The city denied her paid family leave when she updated her information.

The first-grade math and science teacher hired a lawyer, who told her that she was denied leave because she couldn't produce a birth certificate.

The District of Columbia didn't respond to requests for comment.

O'Donnell took to Instagram to share her experience. And once she posted in an online support group about it, she was flooded with comments from women who took sick leave after a stillbirth or had no choice but to go back to work right away.

“Just because I didn't walk out hospital with Aaliyah, I felt like I was being punished for that,” O'Donnell said. “That Facebook group showed me that I'm not the only one.”

Aaliyah was named after the R&B singer, one of her mother's favorite artists. She had a Winnie the Pooh-themed nursery waiting for her in O'Donnell's home. There was a shelf full of feminist baby books. All are now a reminder of a space she will never occupy, O'Donnell says.

In the hospital, her doula encouraged her to hold the baby she had spent months preparing her home and life for, and to take pictures of the their final moments in her arms.

“I thought I'd be a total wreck,” O'Donnell said. “When they took her, it was different. I'm a very spiritual person. I understood that while I was holding her, it wasn't her anymore.”

O'Donnell's experience highlights the flaws in afterbirth policies for mothers of stillborn babies, experts said.



Elizabeth O'Donnell, 30, of Washington, D.C., outside of her home in January. (Photo by Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

[About 24,000 babies are stillborn](#) each year in the United States. An unexplained stillbirth, like what O'Donnell experienced, is more likely to occur the further along a woman is in her pregnancy, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

Globally, it's estimated that nearly 1.9 million babies are stillborn at 28 weeks of pregnancy or later, according to [UNICEF](#).

Countries such as Ireland, the United Kingdom and Australia have birth-friendly laws for mothers of stillborns. Women in [Ireland](#) are entitled to full maternity leave if they have a stillbirth after the 24 weeks of pregnancy. In [November](#), a bill that would give 12 weeks of unpaid leave to parents of stillborns passed in both houses of government in Australia.

Susannah Leisher, chair of the International Stillbirth Alliance, said while these countries have noteworthy policy models, mothers and fathers around the world should get maternity and paternity leave after suffering a stillbirth.

At the time of O'Donnell's daughter's death, D.C. required only medical facilities to report fetal deaths from 20-week-plus pregnancies and provide a copy of the fetal death certificate if the parents wanted a funeral. Just [six days](#) after O'Donnell gave birth, D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser

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signed an act that would establish a commemorative certificate of stillbirth to be made available at parents' request.

But that came too late for O'Donnell, who says the only documentation she has for her daughter is cremation documentation from the funeral.

When it comes to family medical leave, there is still confusion surrounding miscarriages and stillbirth because it's not laid out in the law that they're covered, according to [Vasu Reddy](#), senior policy counsel for workplace programs at the National Partnership for Women & Families.



O'Donnell strives to find purpose through her fight.

“The emotional and psychological needs and harm that comes from an experience like that is extremely serious and something someone would need time off for,” Reddy said.

O'Donnell hopes to turn to her experience into something positive.

“I will not give up this fight,” she said. “[Maybe] I can find some purpose in this and become an advocate. ... As a country we must move toward what other countries are doing in making sure mothers are taken care of.”

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