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# Brief Submission in Support of Motion 110

**Author:** Cheryl Salter-Roberts, CCFE, CBC  
Executive Director and Grief Counsellor

**Organization:** BriarPatch Family Life Education Centre

**Program:** H.E.A.R.T.S Baby Loss Support Program

**Address:** #100a – 50 Brentwood Boulevard  
Sherwood Park, Alberta T8A 2H5

**Phone:** 780.464.3217

**Email:** [heartsbabyloss@shaw.ca](mailto:heartsbabyloss@shaw.ca)

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Motion 110  
Human Resources Committee  
Ottawa, Ontario

Clerk of the Committee  
Stephanie Feldman

Blake Richards MP  
Banff-Airdrie

To Whom It May Concern,

Today, on International Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Day, I am both humbled and proud to submit this Brief in Support of Motion 110. As both a bereaved baby loss parent and the creator of a local baby loss support program in my community, I would like to share my experience and the knowledge I now possess in this unique and critical area.

My husband and I knew long before we married that a larger than normal family was something we both hoped to achieve. We were fortunate that conceiving was never an issue for us but staying pregnant in time became a challenge. Our first couple of pregnancies were easy and we sailed through the months, and welcomed naturally our first daughter, Chelsea, then two years later, our first son, Brady. With our first child, I was able to enjoy a maternity leave, then returned to my job working just on Saturdays to avoid childcare costs but keep my foot in the door. I ended up being home with my children for more than 20 years before returning to the career I had been creating while my children napped.

When it was time for our third child, we were surprised to experience the first of many losses. Our doctor and midwife did not have any answers for us as this loss was very early in my pregnancy. We took some time to heal and then tried again, happily welcoming another healthy and naturally born son, Brodie, the following year. We took a short break while my husband returned to university and in his final year, decided it was time for our fourth baby. Again, we experienced two miscarriages before finally welcoming our second daughter, Chynna, just ten days before graduation. A magical time as my husband started his new career and we began life as a family of six.

Our losses during these years were heartfelt but so very difficult. With the support of good friends and family, and each other, we muddled through. But it was our next two losses that totally changed our world. And our path in life.

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As our children grew, healthy, happy and strong, we knew that we wanted our family to continue to grow and were so excited to announce our next pregnancy. Although this one was a bit more challenging, I chalked it up to age and chasing four amazing kids around. But one night, just after everyone was asleep, just two months before our due date, I realized I was in labor. Though our son was to be born at home, we decided to head to the hospital with the hope that they could stop my early labor. Unfortunately, I labor too quickly and there was nothing anyone could do. We were treated with grace and dignity, care and compassion but the following morning, we arrived home with empty arms and broken hearts. We named our son Bretton~Elijah Lucas and his birth and death altered our lives forever. Within days we knew this wasn't a loss we would be able to figure out on our own and we sought support, travelling in to the City of Edmonton to attend the only program we could find. It was helpful and comforting to be in the presence of other families who understood our pain and passed no judgement on our experience. However, the drive in to the City was long and in time, we decided to create a program in our hamlet of Sherwood Park, Alberta. This was the beginning of the H.E.A.R.T.S. Baby Loss Program in 1996 ([www.heartsbabyloss.ca](http://www.heartsbabyloss.ca)) and today we have supported, counselled, held and cared for over 2,600 families in person and many, many more by phone, email and Skype. Our services included support groups, online chat, home visits, counselling, programming for siblings (children and teens), supports for the community at large and friends, a beautiful newsletter, an Annual Candlelight Memorial Service and resources for anyone seeking support or information. Just over six years ago, we launched the Baby Steps Walk to Remember ([www.babystepswalk.com](http://www.babystepswalk.com)), a day for anyone touched by the loss of a precious baby during pregnancy, or anytime after birth. Yesterday, was our sixth Walk to Remember and we walked with just under 300 parents, siblings, friends and family members, as we honoured 206 babies for this year's Walk. In six years, over 1,800 people have walked our path, representing over just over 1,200 babies. Every year in Alberta, over 16,000 babies are lost during pregnancy or after birth, with 1 out of every 4 babies dying by miscarriage. And over 350 babies dying by stillbirth, like our son, Bretton. Without a breath and without opening his eyes, Bretton's short existence has created support, education, awareness and compassion for those who suffer this unique and tremendous loss. We often asked the question "why" after Bretton's birth/death. In time, we have come to see his purpose was to be the catalyst for programming and we are happy to devote our life to this special and very needed cause.

As we developed our program, we were encouraged to offer other options to families in our community and very quickly, H.E.A.R.T.S. paved the way to create an entire family life education centre, with birthing classes, doula services, a toy lending library, play groups and expanded grief services for all community members. This work was helpful to our own journey as we turned our heavy grief energy into positive manpower and inspiration. Our whole family was involved and our children have become amazing volunteers and phenomenal ambassadors for children, teens and families. Amazing and healing work.

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But then, it happened again.

We waited some time to heal and to create our family life education centre. And then we finally felt well enough to embark on a pregnancy to create our “rainbow” baby ~ a baby born after the storm of miscarriage or stillbirth. Our doctor and midwife were confident our stillbirth experience would not be repeated as I was still young and very healthy. But on the evening of August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1998, in the comfort of our home, we welcomed Ciara~Rose Kennedy, with a quick hello and a very sad goodbye, all in a moment that stopped our lives again. This time, we knew how to find support and how to incorporate this incredibly hard loss in to our life one more. But even with all our experience, knowledge and community around us, our arms were once again empty and our hearts once again broken.

Over the next few years, as we continued to grow in our healing, we experienced three more miscarriages and decided that without a medical reason for all our losses, we would focus our energy on continuing to raise the four amazing children we are so grateful to have and help the families who on a daily basis contact us for guidance as they grapple with their own baby loss journey. In time, we chose to rename our centre, combining the first part of Bretton’s name (Br) with the middle of Ciara’s name (iar) to create our legacy project: the BriarPatch Family Life Education Centre. The “Patch” represents our little quilted heart in the logo for our baby loss program, H.E.A.R.T.S. Now in our 22<sup>nd</sup> year of offering services, this Centre is thriving and evolving but unfortunately, our biggest program is the baby loss program. We wish it were the smallest one.

Four healthy children. Two significant stillbirths. Six early miscarriages. Losses many people won’t ever experience. But for those who do, the darkness of the early days of loss become the darkness of the days of grief that follow for the rest of their lives. This is not a grief that can be simply overcome by reading a book or attending a support group. Those both help but baby loss for most families requires intense care from a physician or caregiver for the physical impacts, specialized support for the emotional impacts, community supports for the social impacts, educated support for the spiritual impacts and psychological support for the cognitive impacts (on various levels). This is a grief and an experience that is like no other. No of us entered in to our pregnancies with a check list of what to do if we lose our baby. No of us had thoughts about how to handle a miscarriage. How to handle the broken hearts and the fractured relationships. Or where we would bury our baby, who would do the service and what style of casket to choose. No one us entered in to our pregnancies with hopes of loss.

I’d like to now share my thoughts in support of Motion 110. This initiative was first brought to my attention by MP Blake Richards and we are happy not only as a family but as an organization to provide insight in to the plight of our families and the impact of baby loss on families and the community at large. For the families that have been able to access Employment Insurance Benefits for their Maternity/Paternity Leave, it is heartbreaking to hear the stories of our baby loss

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families who find themselves cut off from the benefits once the systems learns their baby has died. On top of a reduced income already, there are many costs associated with baby loss and most families are not prepared for this challenge. Paying for a funeral is costly and though the funeral homes are often generous in helping with reduced costs or covering expenses, in the end there are still items that do need to be paid for. If the father or partner takes time from work to support the mother but also to take time for their own grief, there may be additional lost wages to think about and cover. Our medical system covers many procedures but with a baby loss, there may be medications or services that are not part of the Provincial Health Plan or supported by private benefits. Counselling may be offered but the costs can be high and very few appointments again covered. Children and teens, the siblings are greatly affected by baby loss, resulting in missed school days, counselling appointments, and may present with behaviour that could begin as they struggle to understand what has happened. Children and teens do not possess the language to fully talk about their feelings and emotions and this is where we see adverse behaviors that could, without support, escalate into experimenting with drugs and alcohol, or crime.

Mental health issues could formulate and this is another cost to the system itself. We need, as a country, support our grieving families as they journey through baby loss with legislation that gives them the opportunity to retain their benefits to give them time to heal, time as a family to work through this tremendous grief journey, and funded community supports for the parents, the children, extended family members and the community at large. Baby loss affects us all in lost work time, lost social time, lost physical time and lost emotional time.

Over the last 22 years of operating our baby loss program and our family life education centre, we have heard many, many stories of families being denied their Employment Insurance Benefits/Maternity/Paternity/Sick Benefits due to the death of their precious baby. These stories are heartbreaking and everyone feels so helpless to support these families as they seek to heal but are not given the time off they need to physically recover and at the same time, explore their grief in with focus on their cognitive wellness.

Today I ask, on International Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Day, for an examination of the current structure for families to access and retain the full benefits they are entitled to under the Employment Insurance Act, to create a new Benefit so that all will be provided what is needed and for funded, comprehensive grief supports across Canada, for ALL baby loss families in ALL communities. We offer our experience and expertise to those who will examine this issue, those who will bring forward their recommendations and those who will decide the outcome of this important Motion for our grieving baby loss families.

I eagerly await your response and trust the information provided is helpful to the committee. I am available for any supports that may be needed from myself, my family and/or our organization. Thank you for your time in reading this brief.

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Sincerely,

Cheryl Salter-Roberts, CCFE, CBC

Executive Director and Grief Educator

Proud wife to Bill and honoured mother to Chelsea, Brady, Brodie and Chynna,  
and grieving mother to Bretton, Ciara, Birkley, Cabriola, Cambria, Beau, Cree and  
Bentley ~ gone too soon, forever loved, never forgotten

The BriarPatch Family Life Education Centre is located in the hamlet of Sherwood Park, Alberta. Created in 1996 with the H.E.A.R.T.S. Baby Loss Support Program, this Registered Canadian Charity offers a variety of programming to support families from birth to death. The goal of the Centre is to help families find their strengths as they seek support to raise healthy and happy children. The BriarPatch welcomes all to the Centre to grow and connect.