

Testimony in opposition to 2017 Alaska bill to legalize assisted suicide

I am Marilyn Golden, Senior Policy Analyst with the Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund—speaking in opposition.

Introduction to social justice basis for opposition

The proponents of H 54 support it under the banner of choice.

But choice is a myth in the context of our unjust health care reality. End-of-life treatment options are already limited for thousands of people—constrained by poverty, disability discrimination, or other obstacles. Adding this so-called “choice” into our dysfunctional health care system will push people into cheaper lethal options.

H 54 protects doctors and hospitals, not patients. It presumes that all families are happy, and that everyone is financially secure and has no one who wants to harm them.

The bill assumes a fantasy world where government will effectively address abuse, under a bill with no provision for doing so.

Elder and disability abuse

H 54 is a recipe for elder abuse (and disability abuse). An heir (someone who stands to inherit from the ill person) or an abusive caregiver can steer someone towards it, witness their request, pick up their lethal dose for them, and even, in the end, give the drug—because no objective witness is required at the death, so who would know?

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The Oregon model is rife with problems

The Oregon model, on which this bill is based, is rife with problems. There is evidence that, in Oregon and in Washington state under virtually identical legislation to this bill:

- Doctor-shopping has gotten around all safeguards.
- People with acute depression get access to lethal drugs.
- People have lost their lives due solely or partially to economic pressure and even criminal abuse.
- Deaths have occurred by means other than the patient ingesting the deadly drugs themselves, with no legal consequences, notwithstanding what’s required.
- Medical complications from the lethal drugs used have added to any miseries already present for terminally ill patients.
- Doctors have urged lethal drugs on sick patients who did not ask for them.

Hollow safeguards and neglectful oversight

And it’s not difficult to show that, under the Oregon model mimicked by this bill, that:

- Misdiagnosis and incorrect prognosis, common in medicine, can end lives prematurely.
- People with limited means can use the law to die quicker, in order to save their families money. Is that why its supporters would vote for it? Because nothing can prevent that outcome.
- Negligent medical personnel are explicitly free of any liability for their negligent actions.
- People with intellectual and communication disabilities, and with dementia, are at particular risk.

- Abuse is not investigated; there isn't even a way to report it. Thus, it's not what the Oregon data shows—it's what it fails to show. The data show no abuse because the system is set up not to find it.

Suicide contagion

An additional problem is suicide contagion, a very real phenomenon in society. In Oregon, government reports—not from the department providing weak oversight of assisted suicide, but a very pro-active agency that tries to prevent suicides in general—reports that Oregon's suicide rate is 41 percent above the national average, and that all the growth has happened since 2000, which is just after assisted suicide became legal.

Is this suspicious association a coincidence? What my organization hears from people with psychiatric disabilities says otherwise. Individuals who struggle with suicidal feelings tell us that legalizing assisted suicide is like society sending a green light that committing suicide is OK. It encourages it.

One such person sent an anonymous letter to legislators in another state, opposing a similar bill, saying, "The life you save, could be my own."

Far more proposals defeated than passed

All this is why seven U.S. states so far this year have rejected the same bill, including New Mexico, Maryland, and Indiana; and why, overall, about 29 states have similarly said no.

H 54 is bad medicine for Alaska. In the name of social justice, please defeat it. Thank you.