

California right-to-die bill stalls with Catholics opposed

July 7 2015, by Fenit Nirappil



In this Wednesday, Jan. 21, 2015, file photo, Debbie Ziegler, center, the mother of Brittany Maynard, speaks in support of proposed legislation allowing doctors to prescribe life-ending medication to terminally ill patients during a news conference at the Capitol, in Sacramento, Calif. A bill, authored by Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis, left, and Sen. Bill Monning, D-Carmel, right, that would allow California physicians to help terminally ill patients end their lives, is struggling to muster enough support ahead of a legislative vote Tuesday, July 7, 2015. Maynard, a 29-year-old San Francisco Bay Area woman who had terminal brain cancer, moved to Oregon where she could legally end her life. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli, File)

In a blow to the right-to-die movement, California lawmakers on Tuesday dropped one of the strongest legislative efforts in the U.S. to allow terminally ill patients to legally end their lives.

The move came despite pleas involving the case of Brittany Maynard, who moved from the San Francisco Bay Area to Oregon, which has a right-to-die law, when she was 29 so she could die on her own terms after a brain cancer diagnosis.

Aid-in-dying advocates had hoped the nationally publicized case would prompt a wave of new right-to-die laws, But no state has passed such legislation this year, with efforts defeated or stalling in Colorado, Maine, New Jersey and elsewhere.

The authors of the California legislation that would allow doctors to prescribe life-ending drugs lacked enough support to get through committees this year amid fierce religious opposition. Sponsors vowed to continue the fight.

"We remain committed to passing the End of Life Option Act for all Californians who want and need the option of medical aid in dying," Democratic Sens. Bill Monning of Carmel and Lois Wolk of Davis, and Assemblywoman Susan Eggman of Stockton—the sponsors of the bill—said in a joint statement.

Aid-in-dying advocates previously said they would take the issue before voters if the effort failed in the Legislature.



In this March 25, 2015 file photo, Dan Diaz, the husband of Brittany Maynard, watches a video of his wife, recorded 19 days before her assisted suicide death, where she says that no one should have to leave their home to legally end her life, during a news conference at the Capitol in Sacramento, Calif. The authors of a bill that would allow California physicians to help terminally ill patients end their lives, Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis and Sen. Bill Monning, D-Carmel, did not present the measure to the Assembly Health Committee as scheduled because it did not have enough votes to advance, Tuesday, July 7, 2015. Maynard, a 29-year-old San Francisco woman who had terminal brain cancer, moved to Oregon where she could legally end her life. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli, File)

"We owe it to Brittany Maynard's family and terminally ill Californians to pursue every available remedy to give them relief from unbearable suffering," said Toni Broaddus, California campaign director for the right-to-die group Compassion and Choices.

The California measure was passed by the state Senate but hit a roadblock in the Assembly Health Committee, a panel that includes multiple Democratic lawmakers from heavily Catholic districts in the Los Angeles area, where the archdiocese actively opposed the legislation.

Religious groups say allowing doctors to prescribe life-ending drugs is assisted suicide and goes against God's will. Similar opposition helped defeat similar legislation in California in 2007.

"The more people know and understand and learn about assisted suicide and really get into the policy of the debate, the more they begin to have questions and concerns," said Tim Rosales, a spokesman for Californians Against Assisted Suicide, a coalition of disability rights advocates, oncologist associations and religious groups.

Some advocates for people with disabilities say terminally ill patients could be pressured to end their lives to avoid burdening their families.

Montana, Oregon, Vermont and Washington have court decisions or laws permitting doctors to prescribe life-ending drugs. A court ruling is pending in New Mexico.

California's bill was modeled on Oregon's law, which has been used in more than 750 deaths since voters approved it in 1994.

The California Medical Association had dropped its decades-long opposition to aid-in-dying legislation, saying individual doctors should be allowed to decide if they want to help patients end their lives.

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