

How efforts across party lines are keeping assisted suicide at bay in some blue states

For the fifth time in six years, pro-life activists, social conservatives and liberal-leaning disability-rights advocates joined forces to defeat a bill that would have legalized physician-assisted suicide in Connecticut.

Though the Nutmeg State is deeply blue and Democrats strengthened their hold on the state legislature in last year's elections, the legislation to legalize assisted suicide didn't even have the votes to be released from the legislature's Public Health Committee.

"If it wasn't for the alliance between social conservatives and politically progressive disability-rights activists, this bill would probably be law right now," said Peter Wolfgang, the executive director of the Family Institute of Connecticut.

Wolfgang told Our Sunday Visitor that the unlikely partnership between liberals and conservatives is "the Connecticut difference" that has, for now, kept the assisted-suicide lobby at bay in that state since 2013.

"If we get complacent, if we start to tread water, then eventually we are going to lose," Wolfgang said.

Role of legislators

Catholic lobbyists in other liberal-leaning states such as New York, Maine, Maryland and New Jersey this year have been using a similar strategy to push back against the relentless campaign of the assisted-suicide lobby, which is led by the

nonprofit organization Compassion & Choices.

Compassion & Choices has been pushing an aggressive national strategy to legalize assisted suicide since the high-profile case of Brittany Maynard, a 29-year-old California woman who was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer and traveled to Oregon in 2014 to legally end her life.

In 2018, 21 states introduced so-called aid-in-dying bills, though only Hawaii signed such legislation into law. Assisted suicide currently is legal in the District of Columbia, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Montana, Oregon, Vermont, Washington and, most recently, New Jersey.

In March, after several attempts over a 10-year period, the New Jersey Legislature passed a bill to legalize physician-assisted suicide. On April 12, Gov. Phil Murphy, a Democrat, signed the bill into law because, he said, allowing terminally ill people to end their life “according to their own consciences is the right thing to do.” The law will go into effect Aug. 1.

“It’s a sad day and a sad time for us because it’s a very difficult thing to roll back,” said Jennifer Ruggiero, secretary of the Secretariat for Family and Pastoral Life and director of the Office of Human Life and Dignity for the Diocese of Metuchen in New Jersey.

Ruggiero told OSV that New Jersey’s Catholic community had been working since 2012 with a broad coalition of pro-life organizations, veterans’ groups, patients’ rights advocates and disability rights activists to defeat assisted suicide and educate the public about its dangers.

But with New Jersey positioned as a staunch blue state – registered Democrats in the state outnumber Republicans by nearly a million voters – and with the party strengthening its hold on the legislature, politics finally overcame the resistance.

“It was a difficult decision for the legislators. Because it’s a life-and-death matter, I think many of them really listened to us,” Ruggiero said. “But in the end, a lot of (legislators) just went with their party vote, because that’s just the way it’s done here.”

Why assisted suicide is a ‘false compassion’

The idea that assisting a suicide shows compassion and eliminates suffering is ... misguided. It eliminates the person, and results in suffering for those left behind—grieving families and friends, and other vulnerable people who may be influenced by this event to see death as an escape. The sufferings caused by chronic or terminal illness are often severe. They cry out for our compassion, a word whose root meaning is to “suffer with” another person. True compassion alleviates suffering while maintaining solidarity with those who suffer. It does not put lethal drugs in their hands and abandon them to their suicidal impulses, or to the self-serving motives of others who may want them dead. It helps vulnerable people with their problems instead of treating them as the problem.

Source: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops; To Live Each Day with Dignity: A Statement on Physician-Assisted Suicide

Catholic response

Meanwhile, partnering with medical groups, physicians and advocates for the elderly and disabled, Catholic bishops and their staffs in other states are lobbying lawmakers and urging the faithful to contact their legislators, urging them to vote against assisted suicide.

“The strategy on the ground has always been a simple but effective one: Educate lawmakers and their constituents on the many flaws of the bill. And the proponents don’t make it hard to do that,” Jennifer Briemann, the executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, told OSV.

The bill in Maryland – which failed by one vote in late March – is similar to bills that have been introduced in other states. They are all modeled on the 1997 law that made Oregon the first state in the country to legalize physician-assisted suicide.

“Compassion & Choices is bringing their national agenda to Maryland, but we remind people here that this should be a Maryland agenda, not a Colorado agenda, not an Oregon agenda,” Briemann said.

The state-level bills aim to legalize physician-assisted suicide for terminally ill people who have been diagnosed to have less than six months to live. The bills would permit those people to obtain a prescription for a lethal dose of drugs.

“The bill is basically telling people who are terminally ill that their lives are less valuable than others,” Kathleen M. Gallagher, director of pro-life activities for the New York State Catholic Conference, told OSV.

Gallagher also said New York’s pending assisted-suicide bill has no residency requirement and would allow out-of-state residents to travel to New York and legally obtain a prescription for the lethal drugs.

Gallagher added that the state Catholic conference will be activating its Catholic Action Network, an email database of Catholic voters across New York, to urge all to write to their representatives about voting against assisted suicide.

“After Brittany Maynard died, we realized this issue was going to start coming after us fast and furious,” said Gallagher, who in 2015 reached out to advocates for senior citizens, patients and the disabled, as well as physicians, to help form the New York Alliance Against Assisted Suicide.

Other Catholic advocates across the country told OSV that the

assisted-suicide bills lack adequate safeguards, such as mental-health screening and requirements that physicians be present when someone ends their life. The bills further obfuscate reality by requiring that the underlying terminal illness be listed as the official cause of death, not suicide.

Contradictory discussions

The most effective arguments have been secular and make the case that assisted suicide devalues human life. Catholic lobbyists also note that the drive to legalize physician-assisted suicide is happening as public health officials across the country respond to an increase in suicides among young people.

“It’s illogical to think how, in statehouses across the United States, in one room we will have a group of people who are trying to work against teen suicide or veterans’ suicide, and perhaps in the very next room we’ll have people who are trying to work out the specifics of how someone is allowed to commit suicide,” said Suzanne Lafreniere, director of public policy for the Diocese of Portland, Maine.

In 2019, state lawmakers in Maine will consider an assisted-suicide bill for the third time in four years. The current bill marks the eighth legislative attempt since the mid-1990s to legalize assisted suicide in Maine. Two statewide ballot initiatives – in 2000 and 2018 – failed.

“It’s been a longtime fight,” said Lafreniere, who added that the Catholic community in her state has helped assemble a “very credible opposition” to assisted suicide that thus far has shown lawmakers in a bipartisan manner that such legislation is discriminatory against the sick, handicapped and elderly.

Said Lafreniere, “I think it’s important to frame the assisted-suicide issue in a way that is timeless, that isn’t

so easily swayed by quickly changing societal norms, and points out to people that suicide is always a tragedy, whether it's a teenager, a veteran, a survivor of a mass-shooting event or if it's someone who's terminally ill."

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