

Vermont House passes aid-in-dying bill

May 14 2013, by Dave Gram



In this June 28, 2012 file photo, Gov. Peter Shumlin holds a news conference following the Supreme Court decision on the U.S. Affordable Health Care Act, in Montpelier, Vt. The Vermont House approved a measure Monday night that would allow doctors to provide lethal medication to terminally ill patients seeking to end their lives. If Shumlin—a strong supporter of the bill—signs on, Vermont will join Oregon, Washington and Montana as states allowing physicians to provide deadly doses of medication to dying patients who seek it. (AP Photo/Toby Talbot, File)

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The vote was a reversal of the defeat of similar legislation in the state House in 2007 and marked the first time any state legislature in the U.S. had seen such a measure all the way to passage.

By a 75-65 roll call vote, the House approved a bill that largely copies a law passed by Oregon voters in 1997 for a three-year period and then shifts to a system with less government monitoring.

The measure had earlier passed in the Senate.

For the first three years, Vermont's law would closely follow the Oregon model, which allows for several safeguards, including requirements that patients state three times—once in writing—that they wish to die. Others include a concurring opinion from a second doctor that a patient has less than six months to live and a finding that the patient is of sound mind.

"It's an important step for terminally ill Vermont patients," Dick Walters, president of Patient Choices-Vermont, said after the vote. "It's a big step forward for the region and for the country as a whole."

Vermont would be the first state east of the Mississippi to allow doctors to help patients die by writing a prescription for a lethal dose of medication. Oregon passed the first-in-the-nation law by referendum in 1997; Washington state followed suit in 2006 and a court order in Montana made it legal in that state.

Debate included two packed Statehouse hearings in which supporters and opponents took turns voicing their views on the legislation, sometimes dubbed "death with dignity" by backers and "physician-assisted suicide" by opponents.

Critics continued to voice their concerns during House debate on Monday, while supporters, who knew they had the votes to pass the bill, were more muted.

"There is potential here for abuse of the disabled," said Rep. Carolyn Branagan, "especially disabled elders," she said. "This is not medical care. It is the opposite."

Sen. Richard McCormack watched the debate from the House gallery. "This bill makes no judgment about the value of anybody's life," he said after the vote. "It makes a very positive judgment about the value of personal freedom and the right to make one's own choices."

After July 1, 2016, Vermont would move to a model pushed by some senators who complained of too much government intervention in the Oregon system. Those changes would require less monitoring and reporting by physicians. However, there's widespread expectation that lawmakers may push to eliminate the changes set to take effect in 2016, leaving an Oregon-style law in place.

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