

Oregon woman galvanizes right-to-die efforts

November 4 2014, by Steven Dubois



This undated file photo provided by the Maynard family shows Brittany Maynard, a 29-year-old terminally ill woman who plans to die under Oregon's law that allows the terminally ill to end their own lives. Sean Crowley, spokesman from the group Compassion & Choices, said late Sunday, Nov. 2, 2014, that Maynard was surrounded by family Saturday when she took lethal medication prescribed by a doctor and died. She was weeks shy of her 30th birthday. (AP Photo/Maynard Family, File)

Brittany Maynard's last days started a national conversation about whether it's OK for a terminally ill person to end his or her own life.

Now that she has died, it's time to see whether the millions of clicks and views she generated online trigger more than just talk.

Advocates for expanding right-to-die laws beyond a handful of states expect attention from the young woman's story to carry into the new year, when state legislatures go into session.

"I think on both coasts we're going to see legislative action," said Peg Sandeen, executive director of the Death with Dignity National Center.

That optimism will be met with the political reality that such legislation has been pushed for years, often unsuccessfully.

"Suicide is never a good solution, regardless of the situation that one is confronting," said Judie Brown, president of the American Life League, a Catholic group.

Maynard, terminally ill with brain cancer, grabbed the national spotlight for about a month after publicizing that she and her husband, Dan Diaz, moved to Portland from Northern California so she could use Oregon's law to end her life on her own terms. Maynard told journalists she planned to die Nov. 1 and followed through Saturday. She was 29.

She approached the advocacy group Compassion & Choices this summer in hopes that telling her story would lead to political action in California and across the nation. Whether that happens is an open question. But Maynard succeeded in raising awareness about an issue that was trending on Facebook and Twitter after her death.



In this Oct. 21, 2014, file photo provided by TheBrittanyFund.org, Brittany Maynard, a terminally ill woman who plans to die under Oregon's law that allows the terminally ill to end their own lives, and her husband Dan Diaz pose at the Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona. Sean Crowley, spokesman from the group Compassion & Choices, said late Sunday, Nov. 2, 2014, that Maynard was surrounded by family Saturday when she took lethal medication prescribed by a doctor and died. She was weeks shy of her 30th birthday. (AP Photo/TheBrittanyFund.org, File)

"Younger people support death with dignity at really high levels, but it's not necessarily relevant or salient to their lives," Sandeen said. "I think the Brittany Maynard story makes it real."

Vermont last year became the first state to legalize aid in dying through legislation. Oregon and Washington did so by referendum, and it was effectively legalized through court decisions in Montana and New Mexico.

In New Jersey, the state Assembly considered but failed to pass an aid-in-dying bill in June. Democratic Assemblyman John Burzichelli, who authored the bill, said he is hopeful it can pass the state's lower chamber before the end of the year. If that happens, he expects the Senate to pass it soon after.

Republican Gov. Chris Christie has said he opposes the measure.

Compassion & Choice is spending about \$7 million a year to protect the practice in states where it has been authorized and passing legislation in states where it has not, said Mickey MacIntyre, the group's chief program officer.

The group said its website has had more than 5 million unique visitors over the past month, while Maynard's two videos have been viewed more than 13 million times on YouTube alone.

"The incredible number of people who have been inspired by Brittany's story, we hope to translate that into action in moving toward legislative change in this coming session," MacIntyre said.

Not everyone who viewed the videos is a fan. Social conservatives have sharply criticized Maynard's decision, and it's unlikely any Republican-controlled legislatures will consider right-to-die laws.

A leader of a legislative committee that handles health issues in Wyoming said she believes there's no chance the state would enact a law allowing doctor-assisted suicide.

"My sense is Wyoming would reject it out of hand, it would just be a flat 'no,'" said state Congresswoman Elaine Harvey, adding that people in the state have said consistently that they value life.

Maynard's relatives asked for privacy Monday and have not released information about funeral arrangements. A spokesman for Compassion & Choices said she died peacefully, surrounded by family and friends in her Portland home.

Oregon was the first U.S. state to make it legal for a doctor to prescribe a life-ending drug to a terminally ill patient. Through June 30, just over 800 people had used the law since it took effect shortly after the November 1997 election.

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