

California lawmakers advance right-to-die legislation

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In this 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. California lawmakers advanced a right-to-die bill Thursday, June 4, 2015, giving hope to those who want the most populous U.S. state to allow terminally ill patients to end their lives under doctor's care. The state Senate passed the measure on a 23 to 14 vote ahead of a legislative deadline. The issue gained traction nationally after 29-year-old Brittany Maynard moved from California to Oregon to end her life in November, 2014.(AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli, File)

California lawmakers advanced a right-to-die bill Thursday, giving hope to those who want the nation's most populous state to allow terminally ill patients to end their lives under doctor's care.

The state Senate passed the measure 23 to 14, sending it to the Assembly with a vote that marked progress for advocates seeking to expand aid-in-dying laws beyond a small group of states.

The issue gained traction nationally after 29-year-old Brittany Maynard moved from California to Oregon to end her life in November. Maynard was dying of brain cancer and documented her final weeks in widely viewed videos posted online.

She said in the clips, and in the nationally televised interviews they prompted, that she should have been legally allowed to get doctor-prescribed lethal drugs in California.

Maynard's family and her supporters have seized the attention to push their cause, and dozens of states have considered such measures this year.

Opposition, however, has been fierce.

Critics, including the Catholic Church, have called the practice "assisted suicide" and say it goes against the will of God. Others have said they worry that terminally ill patients would feel pressured to end their lives to avoid burdening their families.

The measures have stalled in several states, and they've yet to receive an initial hearing in many others.

Advocates see California, home to nearly 39 million people, as their best chance this year to expand aid-in-dying laws beyond Montana, Oregon, Washington state and Vermont.

Maynard's mother, Deborah Ziegler, and husband, Dan Diaz, watched the Senate vote in Sacramento. "The Senate vote is an affirmation of what Brittany started," Diaz said.

The debate triggered emotional testimony from each side.

Sen. Holly Mitchell, D-Los Angeles, supported the plan, saying the bill "will not force me, if it is not my religious, cultural, ethical belief to do this. It gives me the right, and gives me access to make a personal choice."

Sen. Jeff Stone, R-Temecula, opposes the measure. He said it could lead to California becoming known for "death tourism."

"What's going to be the new theme of the state of California?" Stone asked. "Come play, live and die in California?"

The bill faces several legislative hurdles before it could become law.

Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins, D-San Diego, hasn't taken a position on the bill, and Gov. Jerry Brown, a former Jesuit seminarian, doesn't comment on pending legislation.

The bill is modeled from Oregon's law, which has been used in more than 750 deaths since it was approved by voters in 1994.

This plan, SB128, from Democratic Sens. Bill Monning of Carmel and Lois Wolk of Davis, would shield doctors from prosecution if they give terminally ill adults the option of medical aid in dying.

Only mentally competent patients in their final months would be covered, and the bill would require them to take the deadly medication themselves.

It's the furthest the proposal has advanced in California to date. A similar bill failed in 2007 over objections from Catholic and medical groups.

Supporters, however, point to the California Medical Association's recent decision to drop its decades-long opposition to aid-in-dying legislation and say public opinion is shifting in their favor. The organization now says it's neutral on the bill.

Still, Sen. John Moorlach, R-Costa Mesa, signaled the fight still to come. "For me, it's unconscionable," he said. "I apologize. I can't be party to it."

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