

California right-to-die bill struggling ahead of key vote

July 7 2015, byFenit 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)

A bill 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.

Aid-in-dying advocates had hoped the nationally publicized case of Brittany Maynard, the 29-year-old California woman with brain cancer who moved to Oregon to legally end her life last fall, would prompt a wave of new state laws allowing doctors to prescribe life-ending medications. No state has passed right-to-die legislation this year, however, and efforts have been defeated or stalled in Colorado, Maine, New Jersey and elsewhere.

Maynard's family has been coming to Sacramento in support of California's bill.

The bill also faced opposition from the Catholic Church and other groups that say it amounts to assisted suicide and goes against the will of God

The bill's authors, Sens. Lois Wolk of Davis and Bill Monning of Carmel, already postponed the vote last month because they did not have enough support from fellow Democrats on the 19-member Assembly Health Committee to advance it. The legislation is scheduled to be heard Tuesday afternoon by that committee.

The holdouts have included lawmakers from heavily Catholic districts in the Los Angeles area, where the archdiocese is actively opposing the bill. Similar legislation failed in 2007 amid religious opposition.

Assemblyman Jimmy Gomez, D-Los Angeles, was among those lawmakers still weighing the bill Monday, but he said he was more torn

over the lack of patient safeguards in the bill than pressure from Catholic constituents.

The issue is also deeply personal for him. Gomez said he cared for his father with pancreatic cancer and was the one to tell him he had weeks to live.

"It's not a religious thing for me. It's how this is going to be implemented in the real world," Gomez said. He questioned the lack of mandatory mental health evaluations for patients seeking life-ending drugs.

"It's a matter of life and death, and we have to make sure we get this bill right," he said.

The right-to-die advocacy group Compassion and Choices focused lobbying efforts on Gomez and two other Democrats by touting what it calls broad public support for the legislation.

"The voters are saying that they are supporting this bill, and we hope our legislators are listening to them," said Patricia A. González-Portillo, a spokeswoman for the group, which has said it would pursue a ballot initiative if the bill fails.

Kevin Eckery, a spokesman for the California Catholic Conference, said some churches were encouraging parishioners to call lawmakers to oppose the bill, but support had already been eroding. "As people are more familiar with the legislation, they become more and more opposed to it," Eckery said.

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

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