

Right-to-die advocates call California loss a brief setback

July 8 2015, by Fenit 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)

California dealt the national right-to-die movement a huge blow when legislation allowing doctors to prescribe life-ending drugs stalled, but advocates aren't conceding defeat.

The movement was reinvigorated by the nationally publicized story of Brittany Maynard, a 29-year-old California woman who moved to Oregon last fall to die on her own terms after a brain cancer diagnosis. She argued in widely-viewed online videos that she should have been able to access life-ending drugs in her home state.

That wasn't enough to sway lawmakers on California's Assembly Health Committee ahead of a bill deadline, so the legislation's authors ended their efforts until next year.

Lawmakers and aid-in-dying advocates vowed Tuesday they would continue to fight on behalf of the bill and would begin work on placing an initiative on the 2016 ballot as a back-up option. California is seen as one of the best shots at expanding the thin ranks of right-to-die states that includes Oregon, Washington, Montana and Vermont.

"We are going to see more serious movement in California, it is the most likely, and I do not see today's situation as a loss," said George Eighmey, the vice president of the Death with Dignity National Center who helped write Oregon's 1994 law. "Finally, it's going to hit that critical mass where it hits more and more states."

The right-to-die advocacy group Compassion and Choices says lawmakers have introduced bills in 24 states this year. Many of those bills have not come up for a hearing including in Hawaii, Pennsylvania and Missouri, and have been voted down by Legislatures in Colorado and Maine.

Opponents say this is evidence that support for right-to-die proposals erodes as people learn more about it.



In this March 25, 2015 file photo, Dan Diaz, the husband of Brittany Maynard, watches a video of his wife, recorded 19 days before her assisted suicide death, where she says that no one should have to leave their home to legally end her life, during a news conference at the Capitol in Sacramento, Calif. The authors of a bill that would allow California physicians to help terminally ill patients end their lives, Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis and Sen. Bill Monning, D-Carmel, did not present the measure to the Assembly Health Committee as scheduled because it did not have enough votes to advance, Tuesday, July 7, 2015. Maynard, a 29-year-old San Francisco woman who had terminal brain cancer, moved to Oregon where she could legally end her life. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli, File)

"Throughout the country we have seen assisted suicide proposal begin with very high public approval ratings only to go down in defeat," said Tim Rosales, a spokesman for Californians Against Assisted Suicide, a coalition of disability rights advocates, oncologist associations and religious groups.

Compassion and Choices says 2015 is still shaping up as a successful year for the movement even though no new states have adopted laws allowing physicians to prescribe fatal medication. California right-to-die legislation advanced further than it ever has after passing the state Senate and cleared a key political hurdle when the influential California Medical Association dropped its decades-long opposition this year.

"All of those things, I'd say, are enormous victories or huge steps, and those came about because of Brittany's story," said Dan Diaz, the husband of Brittany Maynard who has lobbied lawmakers on behalf of the legislation. "It is a very personal and very emotional topic, and that's fine. People need to think about it and work through it."

Jessica Grennan, the national political advocacy director for Compassion and Choices, says the group has laid the groundwork for future legislative wins by recruiting thousands of volunteers and winning support from some Republican lawmakers.

"Social movements take time, and it takes many sessions and it takes having tough conversations," said Grennan in an interview from Montana, where the Legislature rejected efforts to unravel a court decision allowing physicians to prescribe fatal drugs.

California's legislation hit a roadblock when some Democratic lawmakers were reluctant to allow people to kill themselves because of their own experiences watching relatives die of terminal illnesses and Catholic constituents urged them to oppose the bill.

Assemblyman Miguel Santiago, a Los Angeles Democrat who once considered becoming a priest, said he doesn't vote in lock-step with the Catholic Church, but the "question (of) how to approach end of life was still an uncomfortable struggle for me."

Debbie Ziegler, Maynard's mother, says she empathizes with [lawmakers](#) who grapple with the issue as she did when she came to terms with her daughter's decision to end her life instead of facing agonizing pain in her final days.

"My learning curve was facilitated by a broken heart, and I wouldn't wish that on anyone, said Ziegler. "No one should be able to force you to prolong your suffering, especially suffering that is pointless."

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