

Maryland lawmakers file 'end of life options' bill

January 25 2017, by Brian Witte

Supporters of allowing terminally ill patients in unbearable pain to end their lives by self-ingesting doctor-prescribed drugs said Wednesday they hope to pass legislation in Maryland this year now that the state's medical society has dropped opposition and adopted a neutral position.

The legislation is being introduced for the third straight year. Opponents, though, have voiced concerns, and a key lawmaker said prospects for the measure remain uncertain.

Supporters note that California's medical society dropped its opposition to legislation before the measure was passed there in 2015. Colorado's state medical society also withdrew opposition before a ballot initiative passed there last year.

The Maryland bill would allow mentally capable, terminally ill patients with six months or fewer to live the option to obtain drugs to end their lives on their own, if their suffering becomes unbearable.

Alexa Fraser, whose father fatally shot himself in response to advancing Parkinson's disease after previous attempts to end his life, said the measure offers people a choice to avoid tremendous suffering. Fraser said the issue affects her personally, after she was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer in December.

"I want the ability to choose a peaceful death with my family around me, rather than one filled with pain or drowning in my bodily fluids or with

my abdomen bursting, as happened to a good friend who had and died of abdominal cancer," the Rockville, Maryland, woman said. "I respect those people who say that this option is not for them. Don't choose it."

Under the proposal, the person's primary physician would prescribe only after he or she and a consulting physician confirm the sick person has a prognosis of six months or fewer to live, is mentally capable to make the decision and is physically capable of self-administering drugs.

Opponents have expressed concern that vulnerable people such as the elderly and the developmentally disabled could be pressured to end their lives.

"I think that there's no way to make sure that our elderly aren't sort of coerced or forced into it, and so I think it's a very dangerous bill," said Del. Tony McConkey, R-Anne Arundel.

Sen. Robert Zirkin, a Democrat who chairs the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee, said it's unclear whether there is enough support to pass the bill out of the committee this year.

"Last year the sponsor withdrew the bill before we could vote on it, so I don't know where people would have eventually come down," Zirkin, of Baltimore County, said. "My recollection from conversations last year is people had very mixed emotions about it."

Gene Ransom, CEO of MedChi, The Maryland State Medical Society, said the organization dropped its opposition for a neutral stance at its September meeting.

"Our membership is too split for us to take a position," Ransom said.

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