

# Bill to ease medically assisted suicide runs into wall of opposition

The bill would shorten the waiting period under Oregon's Death with Dignity Act from 15 days to two days.

OREGON LEGISLATURE

Aimee Green *The Oregonian/OregonLive*

Oregon allows terminally ill patients who've been told they have less than six months to live to seek medically assisted suicide as a possible option.

A bill that would remove some of the hurdles for terminally ill people to die under Oregon's 1997 Death with Dignity Act faced significant opposition during a legislative hearing this week, with some people who testified saying it would further promote a "culture of death over life" and allow "death on demand within 48 hours."

The bill would loosen Oregon's first-in-the-nation law by reducing the standard waiting period after patients ask for lethal doses of medication from 15 days to two days. Among other provisions, it would eliminate the need for two doctors to sign off on medically assisted suicide and instead allow two physician assistants or nurse practitioners to do so.

No individual lawmakers have signed on as sponsors of Senate Bill 1003, which was filed by the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Only two people spoke in favor of the bill Monday. Eight people spoke in opposition, along with 150 Oregonians who submitted written testimony objecting to the bill.

Dr. Paul Kaplan, who said he was speaking for a group of about 30 mostly retired doctors who've focused on end-of-life care, told the committee the bill would help reduce inequities in rural Oregon where most residents use physician assistants or nurse practitioners for their medical

care.

“There are very large areas of Oregon where there is not a doctor available for hundreds of miles,” Kaplan said. “And so this service is literally not available to patients who live in those areas.”

Laurel Hines, a Salem resident, told the committee that sometimes waiting 15 days is too long. Hines said her sister deteriorated within a few days of going into hospice and would not have been able to self-administer a lethal dose — as required by Oregon law. Though Hines’ sister died in Illinois, where there is no medically assisted suicide law, Hines used her sister’s death as an example of what can happen to terminally ill patients.

“I now have traumatic memories of my sister dying the way she did and being in the condition that she was and pain that morphine didn’t control,” Hines said.

In 2019, lawmakers approved a bill that allows a doctor to waive the 15-day window if the doctor determines the patient wouldn’t live that long. It’s unclear how often that provision has been used.

The bill’s opponents argued two days is not enough time to do an adequate investigation into whether someone should be allowed access to medically assisted suicide and such a

decision should be made by doctors, not physician assistants and nurse practitioners.

Gresham resident Sherolyn Smith, who testified on behalf of the advocacy organization Oregon Right to Life, said one of her family members has been disabled for

20 years, has struggled with whether he wants to continue to live and recently was diagnosed with a terminal condition.

"This bill makes it even easier for a broken health care system to suggest death as an answer," Smith said.

She said her relative worries he is a burden.

"The right to die has become a duty to die," Smith said.

Rep. E. Werner Reschke, R-Malin, told the committee he believes the bill promotes a "culture of death over life."

He said a few years ago his mom died of ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, a degenerative and fatal condition that causes loss of muscle control. She went from twisting an ankle, to relying on a wheelchair to being bed-ridden.

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*Gresham resident Sherolyn Smith, on behalf of the advocacy organization Oregon Right to Life*

“Eventually she couldn’t speak but her mind was clear as day,” Reschke said. “And every day my dad sat at her bed and cared for her and loved her until the last day she couldn’t breathe anymore. Colleagues, that’s dignity.”

Oregon voters passed the Death with Dignity Act in 1994, with a 51% to 49% vote. After surviving a legal challenge and a 1997 repeal effort that resulted in 60% of voters choosing to keep the act, it took effect in October 1997.

As of 2024, 10 states allow medically assisted suicide, according to The Associated Press. Oregon and Vermont are the only two that allow terminally ill non-residents to travel to their states to use the law. One person testifying against Senate Bill 1003 on Monday worried the bill could “exacerbate suicide tourism.”

In Oregon, patients must be at least 18 years old and have been given a diagnosis of less than six months to live to access medically assisted suicide.

An Oregon report found that 367 people died under the law in 2023. From the bill’s inception through 2023, a total of 2,847 people have died by medically assisted suicide, which was 67% of those who received prescriptions. In 2023, about eight out of 10 were 65 years or older. The most common diagnosis was cancer, affecting 66% of people who died by suicide that year.

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