

California governor faces final call on right-to-die bill

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October 5, 2015

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(RNS) California Gov. Jerry Brown has until midnight Wednesday to sign or veto a controversial bill that would legalize physician-assisted dying in the nation's most populous state.

Both supporters of the bill, who say it fosters "death with dignity," and opponents, who call it legalized suicide, urge calls to the governor's office and expect this decision to be a tough call for Brown.

"Just like everyone who struggles with the meaning of the end of life, he'll have that struggle, but I don't see him vetoing the bill," said Toni Broaddus, the California campaign director for Compassion & Choices, the national organization leading the push for the bill.

Broaddus, a veteran LGBT activist who was a co-founder of the California Freedom to Marry Coalition, said: "What's more fundamental about being human than whom you love or how you die? Decisions around these reside with the individual, not the state."

Disability rights activist and evangelical author Joni Eareckson Tada is fervently praying for a veto but she, too, said, "I think Brown is struggling with the issue and listening to both sides."

Tada blogged at "Joni & Friends" that the bill undermines compassion and would be "very bad news for the elderly, the disabled, and the medically fragile."

The End of Life Option Act (the bill's formal name) passed in legislative special session in mid-September and reached Brown's desk September 25. But few expected the former Jesuit seminarian would sign it during Pope Francis' U.S. visit.

The Catholic Church has been one of the most outspoken groups battling nationwide to halt laws that allow physicians to write a lethal prescription for someone who is terminally ill.

Archbishop of Los Angeles Jose Gomez condemned the bill, saying in a church column, "Helping someone to die—even if that person asks for that help—is still killing," according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

Compassion & Choices disagrees. It is the Oregon-based action group that 29-year-old Californian Brittany Maynard turned to for help in dying on her own terms rather than succumbing to an aggressive brain tumor.

Maynard made international headlines in October 2014 when she announced her plan to die November 1 in Oregon. In a series of videos she taped promoting national campaigns for the right to die, Maynard called on listeners to "advocate." The End of Life Option Act is closely modeled after the death-with-dignity law in Oregon.

Tada, quadriplegic since 1967 and a cancer survivor, had publicly urged Maynard to step back and let God decide on life and death. Maynard died November 1 after taking the lethal drugs.

Nearly a year later, Tada's objections are unchanged.

She holds a deep religious conviction that choosing a day to die, rather than leaving that decision in God's hands, separates someone from God for eternity. It also separates the dying person from the compassionate care of loved ones. "It unravels compassion," she said in an interview Thursday.

For a doctor to write such a prescription and for loved ones to stand by and let someone swallow the drugs "is a form of abandonment." As social policy, legalizing what she calls "suicide" is to "radicalize one's right to privacy. It dresses up our willful determination as rights," she said.

Others argue that legalizing physician-assisted dying allows individuals to make their religious determinations about death and dying by their own spiritual lights. It's a view that is gaining ground inch by inch in state legislatures.

Compassion & Choices has an interactive state-by-state map tracking right-to-die bills. It shows Oregon, Washington, Montana, and Vermont allow medically assisted

dying but it's caught up in the courts in New Mexico, where supporters are seeking a review by the state Supreme Court.

And campaigns are under way for legislation in 24 states and the District of Columbia. But in many states, the topic lingers for years in legislative subcommittee. If Brown signs the bill in California, or allows it to become law without his signature, it will jump-start the conversations nationwide.

A Gallup Poll in May found that 68 percent of Americans support the idea of physician-assisted dying. Statewide polls show a majority of Californians agree.

Broaddus said surveys show that 60 percent of California Catholics support right-to-die legislation and so do 57 percent of evangelicals in the state. In focus groups, she said they found, "People, no matter how they felt personally, believe every person should be able to make their own decisions about the end of life."

Broaddus said, "Marriage and death are both fundamental issues and most Californians agree that the biggest decisions of your life you should be free to make without government interference and to make according to your own values and religious beliefs."