

California Votes to Make Assisted Suicide Law of Land

A hard-fought measure to legalize physician-assisted suicide in California cleared the state Assembly on Wednesday despite opposition from religious groups and advocates for the disabled, and moved to the state Senate, where it was widely expected to gain final passage.

The measure, patterned after an Oregon law allowing terminally ill patients to obtain medication prescribed to end their lives, passed 43-34 after weeks of hearings and impassioned debate.

“Imagine that it’s one of your constituents, suffering in agonizing pain—their pain medication no longer works,” said Assembly member Luis Alejo, a Democrat from Watsonville who supported the bill. “Then imagine that it’s your father or your mother or your grandparents or your daughter.”

Under the bill, which was pulled for lack of support in July but reintroduced last month as part of a special legislative session to deal with healthcare issues, two doctors would have to determine that a patient had no more than six months to live before the medication could be prescribed.

It also would require a patient seeking life-ending drugs to be mentally competent and to present two separate requests to an attending physician and for two witnesses to attest to the patient’s wish to die.

The bill makes it a felony to coerce, trick or force someone into taking the medication.

Physician-assisted suicide also is legal in Washington state, Montana and Vermont.

The issue gained new impetus in the most populous U.S. state last year after a 29-year-old brain cancer patient, Brittany Maynard, moved from California to Oregon to take advantage of that state's Death with Dignity Act and was featured on the cover of People magazine.

A measure introduced after Maynard's death won the support of the state Senate in June, but died in the Assembly's Health Committee, amid opposition from the Roman Catholic Church, disability rights advocates and others.

After finally clearing the full Assembly, the measure now returns to the Senate, where it is seen as likely to pass again.

The Legislature is required to pass regular-session bills by midnight on Friday, although lawmakers may opt to stay longer to handle special-session measures.

Governor Jerry Brown, a Democrat who was a Jesuit seminary student before entering politics, has not taken a position on the legislation. If it passes and he does not veto it, the bill would go into effect next year.

Polls show consistent support for such a measure in California, and in May the California Medical Association changed its longstanding opposition to a neutral stance.

Physician-assisted suicide is still opposed by many doctors who feel they should preserve life rather than help end it. Some skeptics have raised concerns that disabled patients, especially the poor, will be pushed to end their lives by insurance companies or relatives who did not want to care for them.

Three Assembly Republicans joined 40 Democrats in voting for the bill on Wednesday, after lawmakers added "sunset" language under which the statute would expire in 10 years unless the Legislature voted to extend it.

