

Testimony in Opposition to House Bill 1415

Mark Jorritsma, Executive Director
Family Policy Alliance of North Dakota
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Good morning Chairman Weisz and members of the House Human Services Committee. My name is Mark Jorritsma and I am the Executive Director of Family Policy Alliance of North Dakota. I am testifying in opposition to House Bill 1415 and respectfully request that you render a “DO NOT PASS” on this bill.

Every life is worth fighting for

Family Policy Alliance of North Dakota firmly believes that every person is valued and worth fighting for, because every person is made and loved by God. None of us knows the moment we will die, but we are all worthy of love, respect and compassion every moment we live. I can guarantee no one will regret spending more time with those they love, walking with them during some of their most difficult days for the sake of every moment together. We all wish we had more time, but the best thing we can do with the time given to us is spend it in service and love to those our lives touch. We are each part of a story that’s worth reading till the end.

We have the responsibility and moral duty to pursue every option to fight for our sickest patients and their families

Let’s stop wasting time talking about the right moment to die when we could be helping people find the right way to live every moment they have. I would much rather give a person with a terminal disease access to a drug that may help them than a drug that will end their life. An experimental new drug may not work, but if the child with the terminal illness was yours, wouldn’t you want your doctor to help give your child the chance, rather than help get them access to a drug that will definitely kill them?

Health care options, like palliative care, have been shown to reduce hospitalizations, improve length of life, quality of life, family wellbeing, stress, and all the while decreasing costs in healthcare. Why would we not work to strengthen the quality and availability of services like palliative care to our sickest populations before considering abandoning them to assisted suicide?

Human dignity is part of our DNA, not something defined by our abilities, limitations, or circumstances

It is wrong to measure human dignity by someone’s physical or mental capacity, income, or other status. The moment we label suicide an act of dignity, we’ve implied that people with terminal illnesses or disabilities are undignified for not ending their lives. Is it “undignified” to fight for your life?

Dignity and honor are certainly exhibited by those who fight for their lives bravely until the natural end, for as many moments as possible with those they love. True compassion means walking with a loved one through the last days of their life. That affirms our dignity, rather than denies it.

Making decisions about someone's life or death based on money also doesn't dignify them, it commodifies them. Assisted suicide permits government and insurance companies to decide whose life has "dignity" and is worth living. Assisted suicide can force decisions to be made based on money rather than true care.

Suicide is not the prescription for pain relief

Physicians don't need to assist with suicide to adequately manage pain. Medicines and advanced techniques for pain management are available to relieve pain and allow our loved ones to live every moment. Every person has the right to refuse any treatment and instead receive full palliative care, including pain-relieving medication. Many people suffer from intense emotional or physical pain every day, and we work tirelessly to get them the relief they need. Suicide is never offered as an option for pain relief, and a terminal illness shouldn't change that.

Afraid of being a "burden" to one's family is never a reason for assisted suicide

Studies show that requests for assisted suicide increase when a family member believes they are a burden to their family and others. Family is a commitment to care no matter what—and for family, every moment matters. Loved ones have reported amazing conversations and deeper relationships with their dying loved ones that never would have happened had they ended their lives prematurely. The fullest expression of human caring and love is not abandoning someone to death, but walking with them through the end of life. Family is our safe harbor of love, security, and compassion.

Assisted Suicide Experiences

So what have the experiences been with assisted suicide laws in other places? In the Netherlands, where it has been legal for quite a while, assisted suicide continues to expand. They now prescribe it for psychiatric patients and deformed babies. In Norway, where assisted suicide has been legal since 2002, the law has already been expanded to include those with treatable mental illnesses. Closer to home, Oregon reports already confirm insurance companies refusing to pay for treatment, but offering to pay for assisted suicide drugs. I won't belabor these examples, but the takeaway is that the allowable reasons for assisted suicide expand once the foot is in the door with a bill like this.

This bill is deeply flawed

- **No Liability:** Assisted suicide bills, such as this one, are written to ensure doctors can help you kill yourself without legal repercussions. This bill is focused on protecting doctors, not patients. Further, requiring two doctors to sign off on the lethal prescription is a recipe for doctor-shopping, not a “safeguard.” The prescribing doctor simply seeks out a second opinion from a doctor who will sign off on it. The proponents of assisted suicide will often also “helpfully” provide a list of doctors who will support assisted suicide and sign off as a second opinion.
- **Discretionary Counseling:** Referring the patient for counseling is only necessary “as appropriate”. The bill essentially is asking the attending physician to diagnose a patient’s psychological and emotional state associated with the most important decision of their life, while not being a specialist in mental health issues such as a psychiatrist or psychologist.
- **Family Exclusion:** A patient who declines or is unable to notify their next of kin may not have their request for medication denied for that reason. In other words, a patient can hide the entire assisted suicide process from their family and have their family only find out after they are dead.

Closing Thoughts

We all probably know one or more people who have passed away due to some sort of terminal illness.

My mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s in 1994. It was a difficult revelation, but our family was there to support her. More importantly, her husband of 50+ years, my father, was there for her.

Most Alzheimer patients live for 4-8 years. My mother lived her last 8 years in a nursing home, after already having lived 7 years at home, for a total of 15 years after being diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. That meant 15 years of time with her family. So much for predicting how long someone with a terminal illness will live!

Obviously, most of the latter years were difficult and she was not in a mentally clear state of mind many times. Nevertheless, she had moments of lucidity where the “old mom” was back. At these times, she knew who we were, laughed with us, and told stories to her children and grandchildren about her life – some stories we had never heard before and that rounded out our view of who she was as a person.

While these occurrences were a blessing, here is the more important part of the story. During those eight years in the nursing home, my father visited my mom every single day. No matter what, whether she recognized him or not, whether he was tired that day or not, he was always there.

Those visits showed something I will never forget – the true meaning of unconditional love. If my mother had committed suicide, that lesson would never been taught. Instead, it has changed me forever, and profoundly altered my view of life and relationships for the better.

Those are precisely the reasons we need to let our fellow North Dakotans live out their lives to their natural end. We do not stop influencing the world around us when we face death. It can be precisely in those moments that we often influence the world and those around us the most. Let's not take that away.

I respectfully ask for you to vote a "DO NOT PASS" on HB1415 for all these reasons. Please affirm to your fellow North Dakotans that we value life in all its forms.

I would now be happy to stand for any questions.