

Assisted Suicide Proposal Defeated in California Senate Committee

BY Dave Andrusko

Aided immeasurably by a negative vote by the committee chairman, anti-euthanasia forces were able to defeat an assisted suicide proposal in a California State Senate committee. The June 28 vote in the Judiciary Committee means that AB651 is effectively dead for this year. AB651 largely tracks Oregon's assisted suicide law, which took effect in 1998.

Judiciary Chairman Sen. Joe Dunn (D) said he feared in the future that "the power of money' would expand the application of doctor-assisted suicide beyond terminally ill patients," according to the San Francisco Chronicle. "In this society, in California and the United States, more often than not public policy decisions are driven unfortunately by money concerns," Dunn said. Dunn had previously said he was undecided on the proposal.

Opponents of AB651 included, among others, the California Pro-Life Council (NRLC's California affiliate), the California Medical Association, the Catholic Church, the League of United Latin American Citizens, hospice operators, disability rights advocates, and unions representing low-income workers.

Brian Johnston, executive director of the California Pro-Life Council (CPLC), hailed the "sterling testimonies of author Wesley Smith and Marilyn Golden, a champion of disability rights." Johnston also offered "particular thanks" to CPLC members in Sen. Dunn's Garden Grove district who took the time to address Sen. Dunn's concerns.

Assemblywoman Patty Berg is the bill's chief author. She knew one of the primary concerns people have is that, "safeguards" or no safeguards, such laws would be abused. Referring to Oregon's law, she said, "There has never been any question among rational people that this practice would be expanded and offered to people who are not dying." But Susan Penney, an attorney for the powerful California Medical Association, disagreed.

Penney said the Oregon law hasn't been in effect long enough to ensure that it wouldn't be extended to cover more than the terminally ill, according to the Associated Press (AP). "It's entirely premature to argue that there is no slippery slope," she said.

Many other opponents testified before the Judiciary Committee. Holly Swiger is a hospice nurse who serves on the board of the California Hospice and Palliative Care Association. "Suicide is not medical care," she said. "It is its antithesis."

"Defeat in the Senate Judiciary Committee of California's bill to legalize assisting suicide is a significant victory for those most vulnerable in our society, for whom the so-called 'right to die' would rapidly become a 'duty to die,'" said Burke Balch, J.D., director of the Robert Powell Center for Medical Ethics at the National Right to Life Committee. "Now we must prepare to contest what may soon be well-funded efforts to legalize euthanasia both in California and Washington state through ballot initiatives."