



Testimony in Opposition to House Bill No. 5219  
RI House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary  
February 11, 2024

Dear Chairman Craven and Honorable Committee Members:

The Rhode Island Catholic Conference is the public policy representative of the Diocese of Providence. It encompasses nearly 600,000 Catholics statewide, their parishes, schools, and numerous charities, which combine to form our state's second-largest social service provider network, behind only our state government.

It is sadly ironic that this dangerous legislation is being considered on the World Day of the Sick, a day that asks us to pray for the sick and suffering and those who care for them while this committee is considering putting the sick to death. Pope Francis has stated: "*In many places, the quality of life is related primarily to economic means, to 'well-being,' to the beauty and enjoyment of the physical, forgetting other more profound dimensions of existence —interpersonal, spiritual, and religious. In fact, in the light of faith and right reason, human life is always sacred and always' of quality.' No human life is more sacred than another — every human life is sacred — just as there is no human life qualitatively more significant than another, only by virtue of resources, rights, great social and economic opportunities.*" (Translated from Pope Francis' speech to the Association of Italian Catholic Doctors on November 15, 2014)

The Church specifically opposes Physician-Assisted Suicide because it seeks to legalize the intentional taking of human life; this deliberate act violates the most basic tenet of our belief in the dignity and sacredness of life and simultaneously poses many dangers to vulnerable populations. A truly caring community devotes more attention and support to members facing the most vulnerable times in their lives; when the sick, elderly, and vulnerable are tempted to see their lives as less valuable, they most need the love and assistance of others to ensure them of their worth.

Some patients in states where assisted suicide is now legalized have been told that their health insurance will pay for assisted suicide but will not pay for treatment that may sustain their lives. Physician-assisted suicide endangers the weak and marginalized in society, especially the poor, minorities, elderly, mentally ill, disabled, and terminally ill. The New York State Task Force on Life and the Law explained in its report: "*The Task Force members unanimously concluded that legalizing assisted suicide and euthanasia would pose profound risks to many patients. The practices will pose the greatest risks to those who are poor, elderly, members of a minority group, or without access to good medical care. The clinical safeguards that have been proposed to prevent abuse and errors would not be realized in many cases.*" (New York Department of Health, Task Force on Life and the Law, *When Death Is Sought: Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia in the Medical Context*, May 1994),

Assisted suicide creates two classes of people: those whose suicides we spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year to prevent and those whose suicides we assist with and treat as a positive good. We remove weapons and drugs that can cause harm to one group while handing deadly drugs to the other, setting up yet another kind of life-threatening discrimination.

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"The Church does not claim 'to interfere in any way in the politics of the States.' She does, however, have a mission of truth to accomplish." -Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*



Legislation has been introduced in the Rhode Island General Assembly to require the RI Turnpike and Bridge Authority to design "a safety barrier and/or safety netting" on the Pell, Jamestown, and Mount Hope bridges. (*"She couldn't stop one man's jump. Now she's fighting to add suicide barriers to RI bridges,"* G. Wayne Miller, The Providence Journal, April 1, 2022). Also, efforts continue in our state to reduce the rising rate of suicide among U.S. Military Veterans. (*"In 2020, 14 Rhode Island veterans died by suicide. New program wants to reduce that number,"* G. Wayne Miller, The Providence Journal, September 27, 2022).

House Bill No. 5219 stands in stark contradiction to these more laudable efforts to prevent suicide among Rhode Island's most at-risk people. Vulnerable people who deserve society's assistance are instead offered accelerated death with the legalization of physician-assisted suicide.

The Catholic Church teaches that physician-assisted suicide gravely violates the sacred value of all human life, particularly those vulnerable due to illness, age, race, or disability, and undermines the medical profession's healing mission. *"A choice to take one's life is a supreme contradiction of freedom, a choice to eliminate all choices. And a society that devalues some people's lives, by hastening and facilitating their deaths, will ultimately lose respect for their other rights and freedoms."* (To Live Each Day with Dignity, A Statement on Assisted Suicide, USCCB, June 2011)

Respect for life does not demand that we attempt to prolong life by using medical treatments that are ineffective or unduly burdensome. *"Nor does it mean we should deprive suffering patients of needed pain medications out of a misplaced or exaggerated fear that they might have the side effect of shortening life."* (To Live Each Day with Dignity, A Statement on Assisted Suicide, USCCB, June 2011) Instead, it demands that we respect life as a gift by not actively seeking an artificial means to end it.

For Christians, other religious believers, and many people of goodwill, dying is not an evil to avoid at all costs. It is a step in a journey that continues in the next life with God. But even those without faith can recognize the intrinsic value of human life. They can see that suffering people need solidarity and support more than a loaded syringe and an easy exit. They need their dignity affirmed by being loved and encouraged to hope, not attacked by allowing their despair to reach its limit in self-killing. They need relief from pain and discomfort, not relief from life itself.

As citizens, we need to build the common good of our entire society and advance the dignity of every human life, especially the terminally ill, not attack it with legalized assisted suicide. Therefore, we ask that you reject House Bill No. 5219 and its attempt to legalize assisted suicide for the most vulnerable in our state.

The Reverend Bernard A. Healey  
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