News

Opponents of New York state's proposed assisted suicide bill stand outside the governor's ma

Opponents of New York state's proposed assisted suicide bill stand outside the governor's mansion in Albany, Dec. 3 for a candlelight vigil urging for Gov. Kathy Hochul to veto the bill passed by the Legislature June 9. Hochul announced Dec. 17 that she would sign an amended bill in January. (OSV News/Emily Benson, The Evangelist)

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New York Gov. Kathy Hochul announced Dec. 17 that she will sign a bill that would allow physicians to aid terminally ill adults to die by suicide, making New York the 13th state, along with the District of Columbia, to legalize assisted suicide after Illinois did so earlier this week.

New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan and the bishops of New York state wrote in response that they were "extraordinarily troubled" by the announcement, adding that the passing of such legislation "signals our government's abandonment of its most vulnerable citizens."

"Tragically, this new law will seriously undermine all of the anti-suicide and mental health care investments Governor Hochul has made through her tenure," they said. "How can any society have credibility to tell young people or people with depression that suicide is never the answer, while at the same time telling elderly and sick people that it is a compassionate choice to be celebrated?"

The New York bishops, in addition to Dolan, include Edward Scharfenberger of Albany, Robert Brennan of Brooklyn, Michael Fisher of Buffalo, Terry LaValley of Ogdensburg, Salvatore Matano of Rochester, John Barres of Rockville Centre and Douglas Lucia of Syracuse as well as numerous auxiliaries and bishops emeriti. They called on Catholics and all New Yorkers to "reject physician-assisted suicide for themselves, their loved ones, and those in their care." They prayed "that our state turn away from its promotion of a Culture of Death and invest instead in life-affirming, compassionate hospice and palliative care, which is seriously underutilized."

Hochul, who is Catholic, announced her plans to sign the bill in a local news outlet Dec. 17, adding that she will do so once certain "guardrails" have been added to "address the concerns of some who fear that vulnerable populations, including those with disabilities or the elderly, will be pressured into a decision they would not have made on their own."

NY Gov. Kathy Hochul

New York's Democratic Gov. Kathy Hochul announced Dec. 17 that she would sign in January an amended bill to legalize physician-assisted suicide. (OSV News/Reuters/Kent J. Edwards)

"Confirmation from a medical doctor that the individual truly had less than six months to live, and from a psychologist or psychiatrist that the patient is capable of making the decision and not under duress, will now be required," Hochul said.

Additional "guardrails" include a mandatory five-day waiting period and "both a written and recorded oral request to confirm free will is present, with anyone who may benefit financially disqualified from being a witness or interpreter." She added that "Outpatient facilities associated with religious hospitals may elect not to offer medical aid in dying, and the effective date of the bill has been extended to ensure time for regulations and training."

The amended measure will no longer be open to those traveling from out of state, but will apply only to New York residents.

The New York Legislature is expected to pass the amended bill in January, after which Hochul will sign it. The law is expected to go into effect in July.

Hochul noted that "there are individuals of many faiths who believe that deliberately shortening one’s life violates the sanctity of life. I understand and respect those views. But as I have spoken with people tormented by pain, I have come to see this as a matter of individual choice that does not have to be about shortening life but rather about shortening dying. And I do not believe that in every instance condemning someone to excruciating pain and suffering preserves the dignity and sanctity of life."

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The Catechism of the Catholic Church explicitly condemns the practice of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide as "morally unacceptable" and a violation of the Fifth Commandment, "You shall not kill."

"While physician-assisted suicide will soon be legal here in New York, we must clearly reiterate that it is in direct conflict with Catholic teaching on the sacredness and dignity of all human life from conception until natural death and is a grave moral evil on par with other direct attacks on human life," the New York bishops said.

Brennan and Auxiliary Bishop Peter Byrne of New York were among the participants in a Manhattan vigil opposing the measure earlier this month.

Brennan told reporters at the vigil, "The taking of a life is the taking of a life. … In a situation like this, there is no compromise. I think we have to respond with incredible compassion, first of all to accompany and to help people in those moments of pain, to make those final moments of life meaningful; there are all kinds of palliative care treatments that are available."

Byrne told the New York Archdiocese's online The Good Newsroom, that the measure is "completely disrespectful of human life."