News



A view of the Virginia State Capitol building in Richmond in 2017 (Wikimedia Commons/Famartin)



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While the church's universal condemnation of suicide is clear, the application of this belief in state laws isn't always straightforward.

Suicide has been a crime in Virginia since the state was a British colony, but a new bill signed by Gov. Abigail Spanberger last month, and effective July 1, 2027, will decriminalize it.

The bill has been championed by many as overdue relief for families of those who have died by suicide, but it also raises questions from a Catholic ethical perspective, particularly: Does decriminalizing suicide normalize the act and perhaps move the state toward legalizing medically assisted suicide?

Even though there were no statutory penalties attached to the crime of suicide in Virginia, State Delegate* Marcus Simon, who sponsored the bill, explained that decriminalization will still have substantial effects.



Virginia State Delegate* Marcus Simon (Courtesy of Marcus Simon)

"It will encourage people to report attempted suicides and seek help and intervention," Simon told NCR. "People may have been chilled by the fact that they were confessing to an attempted criminal act."

Simon also believes that changing the criminal status of suicide will bring peace to families who have experienced the pain of it. He said that several families, including relatives of Nicole Mittendorff, a Virginia firefighter who took her own life after being bullied in the workplace, have reached out to voice their appreciation.

For many Catholics though, the issue of decriminalizing suicide is still complicated.

"I can understand as to where there's a little more of a question mark," said Joseph Meaney, a senior ethicist at the National Catholic Bioethics Center.

As Meaney explained, decriminalization offers a potentially problematic pathway for thinking about suicide.

He said he worries that decriminalization could in effect destigmatize the act of suicide, rather than just assuaging people who have been affected by suicide. He fears decriminalization might send "a message that [suicide] is not something unacceptable."



Joseph Meaney (CNS/Courtesy of the National Catholic Bioethics Center)

"One doesn't want to take away the sense that suicide is wrong," Meaney said. "There is a problem with normalizing suicide."

Criminalizing suicide has done little though to prevent it in Virginia. Suicide rates have continued to climb, averaging almost 1,200 deaths per year in Virginia. Likewise, from just 2010-18, Virginia saw a 25% increase in suicides.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, suicide is the second highest cause of death for Americans between the ages of 10 and 34, and more than twice as many Americans die from suicide than homicide annually.

This issue of suicide is being addressed from different angles, even within Catholic studies. Substantial shifts in church policy in recent decades have led some Catholic academics to promote a more pastoral vision for the church's relationship with the many people affected by suicide.

Shaun Slusarski, who teaches theology at St. Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire, and researches bioethics and criminal justice, said the church's current perspective on suicide actually supports decriminalization. He said changes to the Code of Canon Law in 1983 allowed for people who died by suicide to receive Catholic burial rites. Also, the 1994 edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church diminished the responsibility of suicide for those with mental illnesses, while not reducing the gravity of the act itself.



Shaun Slusarski (Courtesy of Shaun Slusarski)

Slusarski also emphasized that the criminal justice system is not the best tool for examining nuanced ethical issues like suicide.

While Slusarski and Meaney may have different interpretations of the implications of this change in Virginia law, they agreed on the need to carefully parse Catholic ethical beliefs from legal frameworks.

"Not everything that is unethical needs to be illegal," explained Meaney. "There's an ancient tradition in the church that says the moral law and civil law don't need to match up 100%."

What are the legal implications of decriminalizing suicide?

Personal injury lawyers who practice in Virginia think that not much might actually change. Because suicide is a voluntary act, even removing the crime attached to it won't necessarily move the needle on holding third parties like schools or businesses civilly responsible. Decriminalization could, however, help with life insurance payouts, which often contain exclusions for deaths due to criminal acts. The Virginia Bureau of Insurance is currently reviewing the law's impact on insurance regulations.

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Decriminalization could also affect criminal investigations in some instances. While there were no penalties attached to the crime of suicide in Virginia, law enforcement did use the common-law crime as a "rare but conceivable" legal vehicle to investigate suspicious deaths, according to Ryan Mehaffey, a chief prosecutor in Spotsylvania.

This year, Virginia also joined more than a dozen U.S. states in considering bills that would legalize medically assisted suicide. While Virginia's proposed bill didn't make it to the governor's desk, New York, Illinois and Delaware legalized medically assisted suicide in the past year.



Jamie Towey (Courtesy of Jamie Towey)

This nationwide trend has raised concerns that Virginia's new law could help the state to legalize medically assisted suicide in the future.

But Jamie Towey, president of the advanced care planning organization Aging with Dignity, said there isn't necessarily a clear relationship between the two laws.

He said there are no indications that simply decriminalizing suicide will inevitably lead to legalization of medically assisted suicide. Instead, Towey sees the legislation as "part of the long overdue process of destigmatizing the conversation around [suicide]."

Ultimately, Towey hopes that expanding the dialogue around suicide and suicide prevention can help affirm the dignity of all life.

"All of us have worth not because we say we have worth, or because we're useful to society, or because the government says we have worth, but because that worth is innate," said Towey, a practicing Catholic. "That is the starting point."

**This article has been edited to correct Simon's title.*