An undated photo shows a Carmelite sister combing a resident's hair at Ozanam Hall in Baysi

An undated photo shows a Carmelite sister combing a resident's hair at Ozanam Hall in Bayside, the New York borough of Queens. (OSV News/Courtesy of Becket)

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August 1, 2026
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A federal judge July 30 temporarily shielded four orders of women religious and Catholic healthcare ministries from enforcement of a New York state law allowing physicians to aid terminally ill adults in dying by suicide.

The Catholic entities — the Carmelite Sisters for the Aged and Infirm, the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne, the Missionary Sisters of St. Benedict and the Little Sisters of the Poor — sued the state July 17, arguing the law would require them to facilitate such deaths for their patients in violation of their faith.

"Families entrust their loved ones to us because they know our homes will be places of tenderness, dignity, and faithful care," Mother Mary Rose Heery, prioress general of the Carmelite Sisters for the Aged and Infirm, said in a July 31 statement. "We are grateful that we can continue honoring that trust and remain beside every resident

until the very end."

U.S. District Judge Anne Naracci's temporary restraining order also sets an Aug. 20 deadline for New York Attorney General Letitia James to respond to the emergency motion.

James' office did not immediately respond to OSV News' request for comment.

Supporters of physician-assisted suicide argue the practice protects the autonomy of suffering or terminally ill individuals in their final days. Opponents argue the practice disregards the dignity of human life and leaves those who are ill or dying vulnerable to coercion, among other concerns.

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."

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul, Democrat, who is Catholic, signed the Medical Aid in Dying Act in February, arguing she had "secured" guardrails during the legislative process that ensured the "integrity of patient decision and preparedness of medical institutions." The state's Catholic bishops were among those who objected to the law, which authorizes terminally ill New Yorkers with less than six months to live to seek physician-assisted suicide.

"Forcing Catholic nuns to participate in suicide — and robbing New Yorkers of the choice to receive faithful, life-affirming care — is both unlawful and unjust," Mark Rienzi, president of Becket, a religious liberty law firm, and the lead attorney for the healthcare ministries, said in a July 31 statement.

"This agreement protects the sisters and those they care for while we fight to end New York's suicide mandate for good," he said.

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Bishop John Barres of Rockville Centre, New York, said in a statement issued through Becket, "This agreement is an important first step towards protecting religious freedom.

"New York cannot force the Church to answer suffering with suicide or abandon the sick and dying when they need care most," he said. "Until our legal fight is resolved, this temporary agreement keeps our ministries free to serve every patient according to the Gospel. We continue to proclaim that every human life is sacred and worthy of love until its natural end."

Also on July 31, the New York State Catholic Conference submitted a public comment to the state's Department of Health calling The Medical Aid in Dying Act "the most significant — and misguided — piece of public health legislation in many years."

They argued that the state's proposed regulations implementing the law fail to "provide adequate oversight of the practice of MAID," and fail to "resolve flaws in the conscience protection provisions in the MAID law."

The Catholic entities' lawsuit against the assisted suicide law is among several lawsuits from Catholic nuns against recent Empire State laws.

Earlier this year, the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne, who operate a 42-bed palliative care program for the dying poor, challenged a law implementing requirements on gender identity accommodations for nursing home residents.

New York is one of 13 states, as well as the District of Columbia, that have legalized assisted suicide. The state's law is scheduled to go into effect Aug. 5.