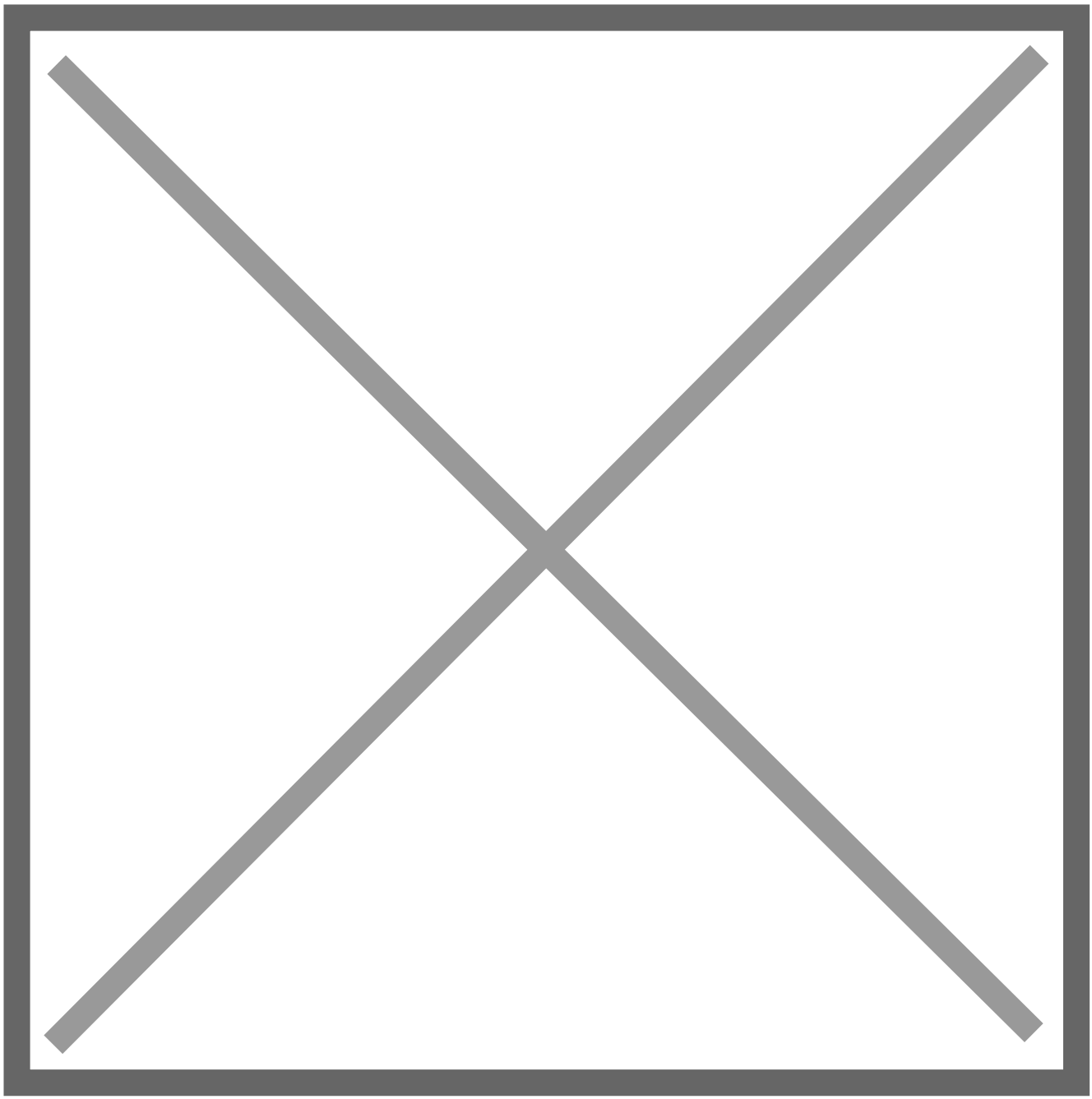
News



Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Ill., is pictured in a July 11, 2018, file photo. (OSV News/Diocese of Springfield in Illinois)



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An Illinois Catholic bishop, four Catholic doctors and a Lutheran nursing home have sued the state of Illinois over a new physician-assisted suicide law before it takes effect in September.

The Thomas More Society — on behalf of Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Lutheran Care Center in Altamont and four Illinois doctors — filed a lawsuit Aug. 11 against the state's secretary of finance and professional regulation and the director of the Illinois Department of Public Health.

The Catholic-run public interest law firm is seeking a federal block on the "End of Life Options for Terminally Ill Patients Act" before it takes effect Sept. 12. The lawsuit filed in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois Eastern Division states the law violates religious and free speech rights of the First and 14th amendments.

Under the law, patients with serious illness whose prognosis is six months or less to live can request assisted suicide. Two doctors must concur on the terminal diagnosis, and, if needed, a licensed mental health worker would deem a patient mentally fit to self-administer a cocktail of powerful, high-dose drugs that would induce death. The cause of death on the death certificate cannot be listed as suicide but as the originally diagnosed terminal disease.

It also states that "no health care entity shall prohibit a healthcare professional from ... practicing aid-in-dying care outside of the healthcare professional's employment." A physician who refuses a request from a patient who then seeks help elsewhere must transfer a patient's medical records "without undue delay" to the new provider.

In an Aug. 11 news release announcing the filing, the Thomas More Society said the law "further threatens the integrity of religious healthcare institutions' identity and mission."

"The institution cannot fire or discipline them for any of it, even if it violates the institution's religious guidelines, mission, and identity. For Paprocki and the Lutheran Care Center, this strikes at the heart of religious institutions' right and authority to govern their own healthcare ministries," said the Chicago-based firm.

The group has also taken exception to language in the law that says, "Intentionally misleading a patient or deploying misinformation to obstruct access to services pursuant to the Act constitutes coercion or undue influence."

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The Thomas More Society called this a "vaguely worded and viewpoint-based ban" that threatens sanctions against any healthcare facility that describes the practice as assisted suicide "and distinguishes it from legitimate healthcare."

"Any provider who follows their conscience instead of complying faces fines up to $10,000, license revocation, and criminal prosecution," it said.

The Thomas More Society's executive vice president and head of litigation, Peter Breen, said, "Illinois is forcing faith-based hospitals, nuns, and doctors into supporting the state's assisted suicide regime. The law commands Catholic hospitals, religious nursing homes, and faithful doctors to promote suicide's alleged 'benefits,' refer patients to suicide drug prescribers, and then lie on death certificates to cover it up. This immoral scheme flagrantly violates religious liberty and free speech rights, and we intend to stop it."

Paprocki said in the release, "At the heart of the Catholic Church's healthcare ministry is the healing work of Christ — to stand with the suffering, to comfort the dying, and to affirm the God-given dignity of every human life.

… Illinois's assisted suicide law undermines that mission by forcing Catholic hospitals and those who serve in them to push death onto their most vulnerable patients."

As a plaintiff in the lawsuit, Paprocki in his capacity as bishop is charged with upholding the U.S. bishops' "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services," particularly at the hospitals under his watch. The directives guide Catholic healthcare facilities in addressing a wide range of ethical questions.

Though no Catholic hospitals are listed as plaintiffs, the Springfield Diocese is home to two Catholic hospital systems, the Hospital Sisters Health System and the Springfield campus of OSF Healthcare.

The lawsuit said the two oncologists and two rehabilitation doctors as well as the Lutheran skilled nursing facility cannot "in good conscience comply" with the law.

"Their basic commitment to preserving patient health, along with their shared Christian faith, compels them to use all reasonable means to save life and tell the truth. Accordingly, they sincerely object both morally and religiously to facilitating assisted suicide in any way," said the suit.

In June, a patients' rights advocacy group, End Assisted Suicide, also filed a lawsuit against Illinois on behalf of people with disabilities.