NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Assisted-suicide bill passes first committee vote in N.J. Assembly

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Feb. 8, 2013
Washington

A bill that would allow assisted suicide in New Jersey, subject to voter approval, was passed out of a legislative committee and will be taken up by the state Assembly.

The New Jersey Death with Dignity Act was approved Thursday by a 7-2 vote with two abstentions by members of the Assembly Health and Senior Services Committee. It now moves to the full Assembly.

A hearing on a companion bill in the state Senate was yet to be scheduled as of Thursday, said an assistant to State Sen. Joseph Vitale, who chairs the Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee.

If passed by both legislative chambers and signed by Gov. Chris Christie, provisions in the bill call it to be placed before voters who would decide whether to allow assisted suicide in the state.

The bill faced opposition from individual doctors and several organizations including the New Jersey Catholic Conference, the New Jersey Council of the Knights of Columbus, New Jersey Right to Life, Medical Society of New Jersey and New Jersey Hospice and Palliative Care Organization.

Despite the vote, Patrick Brannigan, executive director of the New Jersey Catholic Conference, told Catholic News Service he remained optimistic that the bill would not pass the full Assembly or the Senate.

Brannigan was among about a dozen people urging the committee to defeat the bill. Fewer than five people testified in support of the bill.

"The sick and the elderly deserve our special care," Brannigan told the committee. "Medical science is called to eradicate the illnesses from which we suffer. It is not called to eradicate the patients who suffer these illnesses.

"The human approach to dealing with suffering of the dying is not to kill the one who is suffering. Our duty is to assist those who are dying, not kill them," he continued.

Brannigan explained that Catholic teaching does not promote medical care to unnecessarily prolong the life of a terminally ill person.

"There comes a time when the use of machines to keep people alive is not compassionate or even reasonable," he said. "The use of painkillers to alleviate the sufferings of the dying, even at the risk of shortening their days, can be morally in conformity with human dignity if death is not willed as either an end or a means, but only foreseen and tolerated as inevitable."

Several opponents of the measure suggested that legislators place more emphasis on hospice and palliative care, which can uphold the dignity of a dying person.

Dr. Joseph Fennelly, chairman of the Committee on Biomedical Ethics of the Medical Society of New Jersey,

said doctors must act to protect the dignity of human life.

"I have an oath that protects me from jumping into the incredible snake pit surrounding dying," Fennelly said.

"The state has a function to protect the vulnerability of the patient and also the integrity of the medical profession," he added.

Supporters of the measure, primarily family members who experienced the death of a loved one because of cancer or other serious illness, said assisted suicide would uphold the dignity of an individual who could determine when to die and avoid being a "burden" on others.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/11/2013 - 10:11*): http://ncronline.org/news/politics/assisted-suicide-bill-passes-first-committee-vote-nj-assembly