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For the Juneau Empire

Enabling terminally ill Alaskans to die peacefully



B. Ella Saltonstall

What do you want your final days and hours to look like?

An important end-of-life option, known as medical aid in dying, allows mentally capable, terminally ill patients with less than six-months to live, to request from their physician a prescription for medication they can decide to take to die peacefully in their sleep if their suffering becomes unbearable.

The End of Life Option Act (House Bill 54), which is being considered in the Alaska Legislature, provides Alaskans this option at the end of one's life by authorizing medical aid in dying.

Talking about death is something I've become used to over the past couple of years. My advocacy for passing medical aid-in-dying legislation began after witnessing both of my parents' deaths. I was present as they both died from terminal cancer, 25 years apart from each other, here in Alaska. For my father's death, I was a teenager in Kodiak when hospice didn't even yet formally exist; however, our father died in our home, free from any machines as we said goodbye to him following a short but very intense unsuccessful cancer treatment.

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My mother declined all treatment after she was given her terminal illness diagnosis and died at home a couple of months later, surrounded by my sister and me. However, even with her confidence in her decision of no treatment, she spent time in her final days carrying the emotional burden of not wanting to cause my sister or me undue discomfort in caregiving for her for a potentially prolonged or painful death at home.

In these conversations, I learned that refusing treatment ultimately widens the conversations about other end-of-life care options, such as hospice and palliative care, that enable the dying person to live the remaining days with maximum quality of life instead of continuing efforts at "living" longer with possible negative side effects of medication. The fact that medical aid in dying was not a possible option for my mom in Alaska came up often in our remaining time with her.

Support for medical aid in dying is increasing across the country, with national and state polls showing a majority of people across the ethnic, political and religious spectrum want this option. Increasingly, state medical societies nationwide are rescinding either their opposition to medical aid in dying and taking a neutral stance. Since Oregon passed medical aid-in-dying legislation in 1994, Washington, Vermont, California, Colorado and the District of Columbia have passed comparable legislation and Montana authorized this end-of-life care option via a state Supreme Court ruling. Safeguards in place for medical aid in dying have succeeded — not a single incidence of misuse has been reported in the cumulative 40 years of experience with this option in these six states and the District of Columbia.

Alaskans support this important option.

Alaskans are increasingly taking notice of this topic. Last month, the Board of Supervisors in Girdwood unanimously passed a resolution in support of medical aid-in-dying.

In my discussions with hundreds of Alaskans from all corners of the state over the past six months, I've seen an overwhelming support for this option at the end of life. People who have held the hand of someone with a terminal illness diagnosis often express an understanding for the need for this option. No individual wants to see their loved one in unnecessary prolonged pain at the end of their life.

It is time for Alaska to grant terminally-ill individuals the freedom to live their final days focusing on the love, joy and beauty around them with the option of peacefully dying when they are ready. If you support having this option for yourself or those around you, please contact your state senators and representatives and let them know you support HB 54.

B. Ella Saltonstall, a volunteer team leader for Compassion and Choices in Kodiak and mother of two boys, is a lifelong Alaskan, as well as arts and music advocate in Kodiak, who is completing her graduate studies in Speech and Language Pathology.

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