

FAX: 907-465-3472

TO: Representative Paul Seaton

DATE: April 12, 2015

RE: House Committee, Health and Social Servicing hearing on House Bill 99

FROM: Karen Dechman Bond, 907-227-6717, karen@post.harvard.edu, 4620 Golden Spring, Circle, Anchorage, Alaska 99507

Dear Representative Seaton,

I am writing to express an apology to you and the members of your committee for my having left the hearing chamber during the testimonies of House Bill 99. I very much wanted to remain, but I found myself unable to continue hearing testimony as call after call reiterated the human suffering of my fellow Alaskans. As you may recall, my brother just died a very painful death four months ago, so House Bill 99 is very personal for me and my family. When one of our fellow Alaskans called in to read excerpts from her terminally ill husband's suicide note, it was so powerful and similar to my own brother's situation, that I found myself unable to remain without distracting the hearing with my emotional reaction. I am typically a very professional and controlled person, but the suffering of my brother is too fresh in my mind. I hope that you and the members of your committee will forgive me.

I deeply appreciated your sharing your own personal experiences regarding terminally ill family members. What you shared was powerful. I think it is challenging for those who have not witnessed the suffering of a terminally ill loved one to fully comprehend what you and I know. This is a very Alaskan piece of legislation and I agree with you that it is very Republican in its intent, emphasizing independence and liberty.

I thank you and your committee for your patience, kindness and consideration with these hearings. My family and our friends are grateful and will continue to closely follow House Bill 99.

House Bill 99, Health and Social Services Committee, April 9, 2015, Juneau, Alaska

Testimony of Karen Dechman Bond, Anchorage, Alaska

Having never been to Juneau, I felt this Bill was of such importance that I flew down here today to speak before this committee regarding the death of my brother, Mark, and how House Bill 99 would have spared him a tremendous amount of pain and suffering.

My brother died of esophageal cancer four months ago. Esophageal cancer is the fastest growing cancer in the United States with low survival rate. It is caused by acid reflux, or smoking, or consuming alcohol. My brother was very active, didn't smoke, occasionally drank, but did suffer from what many would consider normal acid indigestion from time to time. He went from being an active hiker, cave diver, guitarist, world traveler, devoted father, who was quick to laugh, to a grim, pain-wracked, human-being. He lost thirty pounds in two months, being unable to eat and then the cancer, as it slowly consumed his body from within, caused his body to swell and swell. The cancer caused a bowel obstruction, which is not uncommon, but was inoperable, and he was unable to have a bowel movement. My formerly happy, strong, independent, proud, brother, went from helping others, to needing others to give him suppository (he could not swallow) drugs to stop the many fevers that now plagued him daily. He had an IV of morphine that did not stop the pain and certainly did not stop his awareness of what was happening to him. He woke up day after day (he could barely sleep anyway, given the pain) in a living hell.

My brother asked me for my help to end his life. Instead of shopping for holiday presents, I found myself shopping for instruments of death. Instead of working on holiday cards, he worked on his suicide note. Mark had done a tremendous amount of research, but he was still afraid that whatever method he chose for his suicide, would not be successful. He was justifiably afraid of ending up hurting himself more, mangling his already broken body further and that I would be charged with murder, which would prevent me from protecting his daughter once he was gone. He ultimately planned to die by a poison gas and once having turned it on and he placed it over his face, he was going to handcuff himself to a rail, thus preventing himself from accidentally removing the mask during a death seizure and not succeeding in finding peace. My job was to get the heavy tank, because at this point he was too weak to lift or transport the tank. I was also going to be the one to find him after death and help him to die, if something went wrong and he was unable to die on his own. His body was in such a weakened condition that he suffered a heart attack during this time and because he was forced to go back into the hospital, he was unable to carry out his plans. On the recommendation of medical staff, he chose Hospice, believing that he would only be alive for a week, but because he was young, his death dragged on and on, full of pain and sorrow, with every day his begging me to make it happen sooner. "Please, Karen, make his happen today." He could not eat, could not drink, and was in significant pain and it got to the point where he was asking strangers, janitorial staff, to help him die.

Before my brother's cancer, I mistakenly thought we died peacefully. I had watched too many movies where a dying person smiled and closed their eyes, surrounded by loved ones as they quietly left this Earth. Walking the cancer ward at the hospital and watching my suffering brother, I learned that this is

completely false. Many of us die in considerable pain, all dignity gone from us, and it is a process that can take weeks or even months, every day hoping and waiting while your body breaks down in front of you, that it will end.

I could not save my brother, but I know that this important legislation will save others from a horrible and agonizing death. My brother didn't die how he wanted or when he wanted. He died around 2 a.m. in the morning, without our elderly mother with him, because she had been sent home to sleep that night after having sat for weeks by Mark's bedside.

I am begging this committee as my brother begged me, to please pass House Bill 99. This is a very Alaskan piece of legislation, about independence and control over one's own life; empowering the terminally ill with the ability for them to choose when and how they will die.

Thank you for your patience and consideration.