

Written Testimony against the End-of-Life Option Act (HB 933)

Position: Opposed

Sharon Hansen, RN, CHPN

Billings, MT 59101

My name is Sharon Hansen and I am a Certified Hospice and Palliative Registered Nurse. I worked in this capacity for several years in California. ***That is until last year, when our first patient requested Medical Aid in Dying, which is where my testimony begins...***

I became a nurse, specifically to work in hospice care. It has been my true passion. Hospice has been a rewarding, difficult and a touching career all in one. As part of a hospice team, we help each patient and their loved ones as they prepare for the most difficult time of their lives. Hospice cares for the patient has a whole person-physically, emotionally, and spiritually. As the ending of their life becomes a reality, fear of the unknown and the anticipation of symptoms can be overwhelming-but there is hope for a beautiful transition. Many thoughts and feelings are shared from patients to the hospice team. For example, patients have shared “feeling like a burden” to their loved ones. When these feelings are addressed and recognized, amazing things happen time and time again! Through our hospice team, I have seen amazing transformations take place with patients and their loved ones during all my years-both emotionally, physically and spiritually. Each step of the dying process is a necessary and vital part of living.

To equate comfort and compassion with assisted suicide is a misnomer.

Pain and suffering not only accompany assisted suicide but also adds the unnecessary *complicated* grief and guilt for the family and loved ones left behind. Unfortunately, last year our hospice team was presented with an assisted suicide situation. To say that it put a very dark cloud over our mission as a hospice team would be an understatement. The moral distress was overwhelming! This dark cloud spread over to every member of our team. To support a patient who chose to take a poison with the intent to take their own life is simply not being a true nurse with compassion and negates the entire hospice philosophy and purpose of our mission. Instead, it is a true disservice to another human being.

This situation was anything but ideal. It had been several hours before this patient finally died. She suffered with vomiting and respiratory distress. Her husband, who thought he would be able to manage this situation (as this was his wife’s decision) was tormented and now left to tell his kids-as she wanted to keep it hidden from them. Before the patient passed, she stated herself she just needed to “sign on” to hospice to complete her check-off list. This is what the assisted suicide community called the “death package”-which included hospice, mostly to ensure there would not be an autopsy initiated. This situation sadly led to significant unnecessary and complicated grief for the family and loved ones. This was a huge disservice to both the patient and their family. This is not nursing “care” or compassion and it certainly does not abide by the Hippocratic oath of “***First, do no harm***”.

I ended up having to leave the hospice field altogether because of the intense moral distress. This transition has, ironically, shown me the bigger picture of this issue. Let me explain...

As I was initially preparing for this testimony, the notion that others are striving to continue to push for the legalization of assisted suicide was just (I thought) within my own little world of hospice and its effect on me, our hospice community and the patient and their loved ones dealing with the unnecessary complicated grief, guilt and suffering. But, now it is even more clear to me that it is **vital** that this legalization DOES NOT PASS.

What message does this give to our youth and the next generations to come?

Currently, I am an RN providing physicals for donors wanting to donate their plasma. I have been astounded by HOW MANY young adults have had either frequent suicidal ideation and/or a history of several suicidal attempts already, and at such a young age. Just last week I was performing a physical for a young girl (early 20's) who was actively suicidal and had been begging for help. The soonest the mental care facility could see her was in April! She broke down in tears and was searching and begging for someone to hear her and **HELP** her. After connecting her with a nurse at the local hospital, she finally got help. That nurse was an absolute angel for that precious soul.

As a community of a whole, we should give an example for our next generation: they DO MATTER and their life is precious. THEIR life is NOT dispensable. No matter the situation, the pain or emotional hardships that arise, **they still matter**.

If it is OK to assist another to kill themselves when struggling with physical pain, emotional pain or feeling like a burden...then what is this saying to our next generation? I beg all of you who are deciding your vote right now, please look at the big picture and where this is leading. What message is this giving to our next generation! This is NOT compassion...it is an attempt to normalize the control of one's life when it feels unbearable or like a burden. Every life is precious and should be treated as such. **As a community as a whole, we can strive to ensure each one of us knows that our lives are precious ...even to our last breath.**