

New Mexico latest state to adopt medically assisted suicide

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New Mexico has become the latest state to provide a legal pathway for terminally ill patients to choose when and how they die.

On April 8, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham signed the Elizabeth Whitefield End-of-Life Options Act, named for a New Mexico judge who advocated for medically assisted suicide laws in 2017 and died from cancer the following year.

“Dignity in dying—making the clear-eyed choice to prevent suffering at the end of a terminal illness—is a self-evidently humane policy,” said Lujan Grisham, in a long statement crediting Whitefield and other advocates for fighting to secure the “peace of mind and humanity this legislation provides.”

When the law takes effect on June 18, terminally ill patients with six months or less to live would be able to request lethal medication.

The diagnosis must be agreed upon by two medical experts, and the patient must pass a mental competency screening. After a 48-hour waiting period, they could take their own lives. They’d have to administer the lethal prescription to themselves.

Some in the state senate initially opposed to the measure voted for it after amendments were made to disallow life insurance collection and to strike a provision that would have given broad civil liability protection to medical workers who participate in the process.

The amendments “weakened this bill; but legalized assisted suicide in any form will only make it even harder for people with disabilities, people of color, and the economically disadvantaged to obtain quality medical care,” said Matt Vallière, executive director of Patients Rights Action Fund, which opposes all such legislation.

The group argues that insurance companies could refuse to cover expensive cures to an illness, electing to cover medically assisted suicide instead.

With Lujan Grisham’s signature, there are now nine states—plus the District of Columbia—that have passed laws legalizing medically assisted suicide, according to

the advocacy group Death with Dignity.

The first such law passed in Oregon in 1997, and the number of terminally ill people dying in accordance with the law there has steadily grown from fewer than 50 each year to 245 people in 2020, according to the Oregon Health Authority. A total of 67 people requested lethal medication in 2020 but didn't take it and died naturally.

New Mexico is the second state after New Jersey with a third or more of its population identifying as Catholic to legalize medically assisted suicide.

Church leaders were “disappointed in the passage of HB 47 and the governor signing it into law,” said Allen Sánchez, executive director of the New Mexico Conference of Catholic Bishops.

“The bishops had shared concerns about vulnerable persons possibly being affected negatively in this by either coercion or human error—in the same way that the bishops opposed the death penalty,” Sánchez said. —Associated Press/Report for America