

## Testimony Regarding H. 3884, an Act to Allow “Death with Dignity” in MA

Good afternoon. My name is Denise Karuth. I am the former Executive Director of Boston Self Help Center, which serves people with any disability or chronic illness. When I first became severely disabled my brother, who loves me dearly, asked me, “Why don’t you just kill yourself and get it over with?” He was convinced that my disability was a fate worse than death.

In my twenty years as a peer counselor, I spoke with many people with new or progressive disabilities who were asked the same question by their loved ones, and I know that if doctor-prescribed suicide is legalized even more people will receive lethal encouragement.

I and other disability rights activists are gravely concerned that legalizing assisted suicide will greatly add to a deadly mix of factors that already lead people who are terminally ill to feel that it is time for them to die. These factors include poverty, inadequate health insurance, and peoples’ concern that they are burdening their caregivers and families—this is especially true for elders who are being abused, neglected, or coerced.

The statistics compiled by the state of Oregon since it implemented its “Death with Dignity Act,” show our concerns are warranted. Data shows that more than 38% of those who chose assisted in Oregon suicide gave “burden on family, friends or caregivers” as a reason for their choice. Furthermore, long-term care in Oregon has suffered.<sup>1</sup> Within three years of the statute’s enactment, Oregon had eliminated Medicaid benefits for 25,000 people, including people with AIDS, bone marrow transplants, and mental illness.<sup>2</sup> Oregon’s state Medicaid plan even sent patients Randy Stroup and Barbara Wagoner a letter that denied their anti-cancer drugs and offered them a lethal prescription.<sup>3</sup>

Instead of following in Oregon’s footsteps by legalizing doctor prescribed death, Massachusetts should continue to provide palliative care, hospice, and other services that will help individuals live as fully as possible.

Thank you for considering these remarks. I would be happy to respond to your questions.

### Notes

1. “2008 Annual Report - Table 1 pdf,” Oregon Department of Human Services, link from Oregon Death with Dignity Act Website, <http://oregon.gov/DHS/ph/pas/index.shtml>, p. 2.

2. "The Consequences of Physician-Assisted Suicide Legislation" by Kenneth R. Stevens, Jr. Physicians for Compassionate Care Education Foundation, <http://www.pccef.org/articles/art42UofO.htm>, 2005.

3. "A Gift of Treatment – When the Oregon Health Plan fails to cover a cancer drug, the drug maker steps in" by Tim Christie; *The Register-Guard* newspaper, Eugene, Oregon; June 3, 2008.