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# Retirees march for right-to-die legislation for ill

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Busloads of retirees from the Sun Cities, Tucson and Green Valley marched on the Arizona House of Representatives on Wednesday hoping to force action on proposed right-to-die legislation for the terminally ill.

If the bills fail as they have in the past, supporters hope to take the issue to voters.

If passed, one bill would allow certain dying patients to request a lethal prescription from their doctor. The other would allow those patients more control over their pain medications, even if the medications could result in death.

Calling their effort "The Million Geezer March," about 100 rallied in support of the proposed bills sponsored by Rep. Linda Lopez, D-Tucson. They mirror Oregon's Death with Dignity Act passed by ballot initiative in that state in 1997. Oregon is the only state with such laws.

Many marchers, some pushing walkers with one hand and carrying picket signs in the other, said they did not expect the bills to make it out of the House Health Committee. In response, the supporters, most from Compassion & Choices Arizona, formerly known as the Hemlock Society, said they are in the preliminary stages of launching a ballot initiative.

The biggest challenge is raising money to support a campaign that could rival those of opposing groups like the Catholic and Mormon churches, said group president Margot Champagne.

The bills' supporters also face opposition from the Center for Arizona Policy and conservative politicians.

"I do not support a right to die bill because then it becomes a right to kill bill," said Rep. Nancy Barto, R-Phoenix.

Barto said she fears such prescriptions could be abused, fall into the wrong hands or be recommended to those deemed "unworthy of living."

Lopez, however, argued that Oregon's law has a proper system of checks and balances to avoid abuse. She said similar laws in Arizona would make the right to die an individual choice, and could ease the physical suffering or humiliation

sometimes felt by those with terminal illness.

Lopez recalled the months leading up to the death of her father, Gerald, when he was in such pain that he asked for a gun to kill himself.

At 56, Sun City resident Marsha Rutt was one of the youngest marchers, but she said she and other boomers are struggling with the deaths of their parents and must face their mortality.

"I watched my mother-in-law, who had a living will, die in her living room in pain, wearing diapers and a hospital gown. She lost her dignity," Rutt said.

## Proposed Bills

Rep. Linda Lopez, D-Tucson, has proposed similar bills annually since 2003, but they have not received hearings.

**House Bill 2572:** Nearly identical to the Oregon Death with Dignity Act, it allows a terminally ill patient to request a lethal prescription from a doctor. There is a 15-day waiting period from the initial request until the prescription can be written.

**House Bill 2357:** It would allow terminally ill patients more control over their pain medications, even if the medications could hasten death.

## Right-to-die efforts

- **Oregon:** Passed by ballot initiative in 1994 and later overturned by the Legislature. Passed by ballot initiative again in 1997.
- **Vermont:** Bills similar to those proposed in Arizona failed in the Legislature in the 2005-06 session. Proposed again in the 2007-08 session.
- **California:** Right-to-die legislation failed in the California Senate Judiciary Committee in 2006.

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