



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Senator Duey Stroebel, Chair
Members, Senate Committee on Government Operations

FROM: Barbara Sella, Executive Director

DATE: February 1, 2024

RE: Opposition to Senate Bill 703, Palliative Care Council

On behalf of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, the public policy voice of the bishops of Wisconsin, thank you for the opportunity to testify in opposition to Senate Bill 703, which would establish a palliative care council.

The Catholic Church supports the use of quality palliative care for those who are gravely ill and at the end of life. As Pope Francis has stated:

Palliative care is an expression of the truly human attitude of taking care of one another, especially of those who suffer. It is a testimony that the human person is always precious, even if marked by illness and old age. Indeed, the person, under any circumstances, is an asset to him/herself and to others and is loved by God. This is why, when their life becomes very fragile and the end of their earthly existence approaches, we feel the responsibility to assist and accompany them in the best way.¹

True palliative care, which improves a suffering person's life and that of their loved ones, is the appropriate response to human suffering and disease. Studies show that when patients receive proper physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual care, they live longer and score substantially higher on quality-of-life measures. In short, true palliative care is meant to help manage pain and care for individuals who are dying, not to hasten their death. We support and encourage efforts to provide more true palliative care options for patients in Wisconsin.

However, any public policy designed to aid those who are vulnerable and facing serious illness cannot include any means of treatment that values expediency over life. Nor can we encourage a system of care that places undue cultural, financial, or other pressures on an individual to hasten the end of his or her life. And while there are many testimonies of true palliative care, unfortunately there are also growing testimonies of palliative care that has hastened death.

In past sessions, the WCC, along with other groups here today, has requested that the authors include clear protection for those at the end of life. The current bill prohibits discussion with the department on "physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, medical aid in dying, or any other act that would condone, authorize, approve, or permit any affirmative or deliberate act to end life."

Regrettably, however, the bill does nothing to prohibit the actual practice of hastening someone's death, especially via the overuse of sedatives and opiates.

The best way to protect patients is to amend the current definition of palliative care in Wisconsin statute. The definition in Wis. Stat. 50.90(3) should explicitly state that palliative care excludes intentionally hastening, assisting in, or causing someone's death. Until this change is made, either by amending this bill or introducing another one, the WCC cannot support the creation of a state palliative care council.

We are deeply indebted to physicians and other professionals who continually strive to provide compassionate and appropriate care for their patients. As individuals and as a society, we can and must comfort those facing serious illness and reassure them that we cherish their continued presence. We can and must tell them that their need does not diminish their value. We respectfully urge the authors of this bill to make this explicit by amending the bill.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.

¹ Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary of the Pontifical Academy for Life (March 5, 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/march/documents/papa-francesco_20150305_pontificia-accademia-vita.html