

Bill would allow doctor-assisted suicide in Vermont

MONTPELIER, Vt. – Father Jay C. Haskin agrees with Vermont Gov. James Douglas that Vermont should become an “e-state.” But unlike the governor’s “e” for electronic, Father Haskin’s “e” stands for ethical.

“Vermont is in a unique position to lead the nation in becoming an e-state – an ethical state,” Father Haskin said at a Vermont Senate Health and Welfare Committee public hearing on physician-assisted suicide at the Statehouse in Montpelier Feb. 27.

The bill would allow physicians to assist in the death of terminally ill patients.

“Vermont should be known for the highest ethical standards and promote the dignity and sanctity of life,” Father Haskin said in opposing the measure. “Vermont should not be known as a d-state where death by suicide is sanctioned and permitted.”

On March 1 the House Human Services Committee voted 7-4 in favor of the bill. Now its Judiciary Committee must consider it, and it must go through the Senate. The governor has said he does not support the legislation.

It would make Vermont the second state in the country, after Oregon, to allow someone who is terminally ill and has a prognosis of six months or less to live to ask a physician for a prescription that would end his or her life. The patient would need two doctors to agree and would have to receive counseling. The bill would require that the medication be administered by the patient, not the doctor.

At the packed hearing opponents of the bill spoke of the sanctity of life and the good that can come from the dying process.

“For almost 40 years I have assisted numerous people in the preparation for their death,” said Father Haskin, pastor of Our Lady of Grace Church in Colchester. “This is an important time to achieve wholeness, peace within and peace with loved ones. So much good can be accomplished during these days.”

Supporters of the bill say it allows for “death with dignity,” but opponents, like Father Haskin, see it as sanctioned suicide. “For persons of faith, their last act on earth should never be an affront to their maker by the violation of God’s Fifth Commandment: Thou shall not kill – thyself,” he said.

Both those for and against the bill had to register to speak at the hearing, held in the larger House chamber to accommodate the crowd. Burlington Bishop Salvatore R. Matano, along with several priests and deacons, attended the hearing as an observer and witness to life.

In a statement released to The Vermont Catholic Tribune, newspaper of the Burlington Diocese, Bishop Matano said all life is precious – the newborn child, the old and the frail, the weak and the suffering, the ill and the infirmed, the distraught and the sorrowful.

“As we care for the child so must we care for all persons in the vast spectrum of life,” the bishop said in the statement, which was also sent to all Vermont parishes for the weekend of March 10-11.

“When we subjectively determine when life begins and ends, when it is viable or not, when it is too burdensome to endure, we begin a path toward self-destruction,” he said. “Life is no longer precious, but just another commodity in the business of living. Relativism becomes the absolute and even the value of life itself is questioned.”

The bishop said the Catholic Church is the defender of life in concert with physicians, nurses, pharmacists and other health care professionals and in union with them seeks to protect those with physical and mental disabilities, those in life-threatening situations and those who have no one to speak on their behalf.

“What is needed is support for and the further exploration of health care measures that will effectively relieve suffering, so that the terminally ill might know and feel the love, concern, compassion and care of a society that protects them and cherishes them, which, in itself, eases the greatest pain, that which attacks the heart when people feel no one cares,” he continued.

Bishop Matano asked if the people of Vermont want to be identified as a “death

state" where life is terminated at its beginning and at any stage thereafter.

"Will the magnificent landscape of this state, which echoes life from its majestic mountains to its powerful waterways, be rendered lifeless by a society in which human lives are threatened from conception until natural death?" he asked.

"Will a state that so vigorously opposes the death penalty and the tragedies of war undermine its stand for life by taking the lives of the most vulnerable among us?" he added.