

# Oregon sees highest assisted-suicide toll ever; Washington law begins

PORTLAND, Ore. – Oregon's annual report on assisted suicide showed that doctors helped 60 patients take their lives in 2008. That marked the highest annual total since the Oregon Death With Dignity Act went into effect 11 years ago.

In all, 401 Oregonians have died by the legal lethal prescriptions, which are legal only for those judged to have six months or less to live.

State health officials said nearly all the patients were older, suffered from cancer and died at home.

Just north of Oregon, health officials in Washington state have filed rules to guide that state's new assisted-suicide law. The law – which closely resembles Oregon's – took effect March 5. It protects doctors from prosecution if they help terminally ill patients hasten their deaths.

The new rules include the forms doctors must complete before the deaths as well as documents for secondary doctors, psychologists and the pharmacists who fill the lethal prescription.

As in Oregon, the rules say the patients must be expected to die within six months and may take the drugs themselves. In a handful of cases in Oregon, those rules seem to have been breached, but records are sparse.

Those in Washington who oppose assisted suicide have been organizing doctors and hospitals to create assisted-suicide-free zones. Some patients have decided to give their business only to health professionals who will not participate in the procedure.

Meanwhile, the assisted-suicide advocacy group Compassion and Choices is compiling lists of doctors and medical offices that will help patients kill themselves.

Catholic health systems such as the Bellevue, Wash.-based PeaceHealth have indicated they will refuse to take part.

In addition to the passage of the Washington law, a Montana judge last year ruled that assisted suicide is lawful in her state. Bills to legalize assisted suicide have been introduced in New Hampshire, New Mexico, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Connecticut.

The Connecticut bill was introduced March 13 and scheduled for a hearing March 20, but was withdrawn March 16, said Michael Culhane, executive director of the Connecticut Catholic Conference.

The sponsors of the assisted-suicide legislation, Sen. Andrew J. McDonald of Stamford and Rep. Michael Lawlor of East Haven, co-chairmen of the Connecticut Legislature's Judiciary Committee, gave no reason for their decision to pull the bill, Culhane said.

But he said the two "knew the pressure was on" after some 5,000 Catholics gathered at the state Capitol on short notice to protest another bill introduced by them that would have given laypeople financial control of their parishes. Both Stamford and Lawlor are Democrats and Catholics.

Canada will soon face another bill to legalize euthanasia and assisted suicide.

In Europe, where euthanasia and assisted suicide are allowed in Switzerland and Belgium, Luxembourg's parliament just passed a similar bill.