

THE DENVER POST

OPINION

Guest Commentary: Legalizing assisted suicide in Colorado would threaten disabled

By Carrie Ann Lucas

POSTED: 01/25/2016

I am a disabled woman, a mother, an attorney and a business owner. I am a parent to four children with disabilities, two of whom are dependent on medical technology to live. I represent two organizations that exist to protect the rights and lives of disabled persons: Not Dead Yet and Disabled Parents' Rights.

I am also strongly opposed to legalizing assisted suicide and the bills introduced in the Colorado legislature that would do so.

I am a person with multiple disabilities, including a progressive neuromuscular disease that has caused me to lose muscle function throughout my entire body. I have a gastrostomy tube, and I am dependent on a ventilator to breathe. Without my ventilator, I don't have years to live. I don't have six months, six weeks, or six days — I have hours.

I have a terminal condition — very much like ALS — and if assisted suicide were legal, I would qualify. This legislation directly threatens me, my family and my community. Much like terminally ill patients, we are vulnerable and can see how legalizing assisted suicide puts us at risk. That's why most disability organizations oppose legalization of assisted suicide.

If I were to become depressed — either situational depression or major depression — and this bill passes, I could go to my doctor and ask for a lethal prescription. Because I have a disability, and because physicians are terrible at evaluating quality of life of people with disabilities, I would likely be given that lethal prescription, rather than be referred for mental health treatment. And if my doctor did not give me the lethal prescription, I could simply doctor shop until I found one who would.

A woman in my situation but without my disabilities would not get a lethal prescription, and would most likely encounter a vigorous effort to ensure she did not take her life. That is disability discrimination.

I am expensive to keep alive. I have had to fight to ensure that I have access to attendant care to live in the community, and have faced Medicare denials that refused to pay for my ventilator and other equipment necessary to live. I have had to fight efforts to place a do-not-resuscitate order in my medical file.

In a profit-driven health care system, people will die needlessly when insurance companies refuse to pay for necessary medications and equipment, and instead offer to pay for a much cheaper lethal prescription. We've already seen that happen in Oregon, where this is legal. We know that suicide is cheaper than treatment.

I do not want to die; I am not ready to die. I do not want to be driven towards death by a system that devalues my life. I have a lot of living to do. I have four children who depend on me. I have dozens of clients who rely on me as their lawyer.

Legalizing assisted suicide puts all aspects of my life at risk. Colorado lawmakers should reject this proposal.

Carrie Ann Lucas is the founder and executive director of Disabled Parents Rights in Windsor.