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### LIFE ISSUES FORUM: FACING DEATH WITH DIGNITY

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By Deirdre A. McQuade

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October is Respect Life Month in the United States. This year, it began with a stark reminder of the need to remain vigilant in facing threats to human life.

On October 5, Governor Jerry Brown signed a new California law legalizing physician-assisted suicide. Cardinal O'Malley, chair of the bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities **called the governor's decision** "a great tragedy for human life. As a result...seriously ill patients suffering from depression and suicidal feelings will receive lethal drugs, instead of genuine care to help alleviate that suffering."

Sadly, Governor Brown deeply misunderstood the bill he signed into law, showing a distorted sense of mercy and what it means to die with dignity. Dignity is inherent to the human person. It's built into who we are. No state or stage in life has more dignity than another. Assisted suicide doesn't offer dignity to those who are terminally ill – they already have it! Legalizing assisted suicide is a direct offense against that dignity, and treats people as if they are disposable. As Pope Francis never tires of saying, there are no disposable people.

Just ten days before the Governor's action, one of the most eloquent opponents of assisted suicide, Maggie Karner, passed away after living with aggressive brain cancer for a year and a half. A 52-year-old wife and mother of three daughters, Maggie bravely faced her terminal cancer with courage and grace.

In her article for the new **2015-16 Respect Life Program**, Maggie wrote:

My brain cancer—or what I can or can't do—doesn't define me as a person. But it does give me the opportunity to witness to the fact that every human life has incredible dignity, whether we are infirm or able. And all the while, my family and friends can daily learn the valuable lessons of caring for me in my last days with real compassion and respect. Through their loving care, they affirm what I also know—that my life is, always has been, and always will be, worth living.

One of Maggie's daughters, Mary, is a registered nurse who is continuing her mother's legacy of speaking up for the rights of the terminally ill and the beauty of their lives. Upon hearing the heartbreaking news in California, **Mary wrote** . . . : "Terminal illness...stole my mom from me.... But it also gave me something that I could never begin to describe.... [T]he greatest honor of my life was to care for my mom in her last days."

In her own grief and loss, Mary exhorts us to follow her mother's example of courage and to defend those who are ill or disabled:

Let those fighting illness and disabilities know that they are precious, no matter what. They should never have to feel for a second that they might have a 'duty to die' just because the option is available.

As the U.S. bishops taught us in "**To Live Each Day with Dignity**," this final stage of life can be a time of deep

reflection, forgiveness and reconciliation in the family, and of finding peace with God. Assisted suicide unnaturally cuts that final stage short. It's time to stand with those who are sick and dying, and not abandon them to suicide by any means.

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Deirdre A. McQuade is Assistant Director for Pro-Life Communications at the Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. For videos, fact sheets, and the U.S. bishops' teaching on assisted suicide, visit "To Live Each Day with Dignity" ([www.bit.ly/ToLiveEachDay](http://www.bit.ly/ToLiveEachDay)).

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