

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Members of Congress and the Senate, and the President of the United States

**FROM:** Margaret Dore, Esq., MBA<sup>1</sup>  
Choice is an Illusion, a nonprofit corporation

**RE:** Reject District of Columbia Act 21-577:

- Prevent Suicide Contagion, Including for Young People;
- Stop the Potentially Enormous Financial and Emotional Cost

**DATE:** January 12, 2017

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<sup>1</sup> CV attached hereto at A-25 to A-28.

## I. INTRODUCTION

If not rejected, Act 21-577 will legalize physician-assisted suicide in the District of Columbia.<sup>1</sup> The Act is based on a similar law in Oregon, which was enacted in 1997. Since then, there has been a significant increase in other (conventional) suicides in Oregon. This is consistent with a suicide contagion in which the legalization and promotion of physician-assisted suicide has led to an increase in other suicides. A government report from Oregon, which is a smaller population state, says:

The cost of suicide is enormous. In 201[2] alone, self-inflicted injury hospitalization charges . . . exceeded \$54 million; and the estimate of total lifetime cost of suicide in Oregon was over \$677 million. (Footnotes omitted).<sup>2</sup>

The Fiscal Impact Statement for Act 21-577 completely overlooked this issue. The Statement does not address the issue of suicide contagion and its potentially enormous financial (and emotional) cost.<sup>3</sup> Act 21-577 must be rejected to prevent suicide contagion.

## II. DEFINITIONS

"Suicide" means the intentional taking of one's own life.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Committee on Health and Human Service Committee Report, filed 10/06/16, p. 2 (regarding "physician-assisted suicide"). (Attached hereto at A-1).

<sup>2</sup> Shen X, Millet L, "Suicides in Oregon: Trends and Associated Factors 2003-2012," Oregon Health Authority, page 6, 1<sup>st</sup> ¶. (Attached hereto at A-2).

<sup>3</sup> See Fiscal Impact Statement, dated November 1, 2016. (Attached at A-3).

<sup>4</sup> Definition of "suicide" by Medical Dictionary, <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Suicide>.

"Physician-assisted suicide" means that a physician facilitates a person's suicide by providing the necessary means and information.<sup>5</sup> For example,

a physician provides sleeping pills and information about the lethal dose, while aware that the patient may commit suicide.<sup>6</sup>

### III. Act 21-577 MUST BE REJECTED

#### A. Suicide is Contagious

It is well known that suicide is contagious. A famous example is Marilyn Monroe.<sup>7</sup> Her widely reported suicide was followed by "a spate of suicides."<sup>8</sup>

With the understanding that suicide is contagious, groups such as the National Institute of Mental Health and the World Health Organization have developed guidelines for the responsible reporting of suicide, to prevent contagion. Key points include that the risk of additional suicides increases:

[W]hen the story explicitly describes the suicide method, uses dramatic/graphic headlines or images, and repeated/extensive coverage sensationalizes or glamorizes a death.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The AMA Code of Medical Ethics, Opinion 2.211, attached hereto at A-4.

<sup>6</sup> Id.

<sup>7</sup> Margot Sanger-Katz, "The Science Behind Suicide Contagion," *The New York Times*, August 13, 2014. (Excerpt attached hereto at A-5).

<sup>8</sup> Id.

<sup>9</sup> "Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide," The National Institute of Mental Health. (Attached hereto at A-6). See also "Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals," World Health Organization, at [http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/prevention/suicide/resource\\_media.pdf](http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/resource_media.pdf)

**B. Lovelle Svart and Brittany Maynard**

In Oregon, prominent cases of physician-assisted suicide include Lovelle Svart and Brittany Maynard.

Lovelle Svart died in 2007.<sup>10</sup> *The Oregonian*, which is Oregon's largest paper, violated the recommended guidelines for the responsible reporting of suicide by explicitly describing her suicide method and by employing "dramatic/graphic images." Indeed, visitors to the paper's website were invited "to hear and see when Lovelle swallowed the fatal dose."<sup>11</sup> There are still photos of her online, lying in bed, dying.<sup>12</sup>

Brittany Maynard died from physician-assisted suicide in Oregon, on November 1, 2014.<sup>13</sup> Contrary to the recommended guidelines, there was "repeated/extensive coverage" in multiple media, worldwide.<sup>14</sup> This coverage is ongoing, including before this body, where her image and story is being used to promote Act 21-577.

**C. The Young Man Wanted to Die like Brittany Maynard**

A month after Ms. Maynard's death, Will Johnston MD was

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<sup>10</sup> Ed Madrid, "Lovelle Svart, 1945 - 2007, *The Oregonian*, September 28, 2007. (Attached at A-7)

<sup>11</sup> Id.

<sup>12</sup> Photos at A-8 & A-9, printed from online sources, November 8, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brittany\\_Maynard](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brittany_Maynard)

<sup>14</sup> The worldwide coverage of Ms. Maynard in multiple media started with an exclusive cover story in *People Magazine*. A copy of the cover is attached hereto at A-10. Other media included TV, radio, print, web and social media.

presented with a twenty year old patient during an emergency appointment.<sup>15</sup> The young man, who had been brought in by his mother, was physically healthy, but had been acting oddly and talking about death.<sup>16</sup>

Dr. Johnston asked the young man if he had a plan.<sup>17</sup> The young man said "yes," that he had watched Ms. Maynard's video.<sup>18</sup> He said that he was very impressed with her and that he identified with her and that he thought it was a good idea for him to die like her.<sup>19</sup> He also told Dr. Johnston that after watching the video he had been surfing the internet looking for suicide drugs.<sup>20</sup> Dr. Johnston's declaration states:

He was actively suicidal and agreed to go to the hospital, where he stayed for five weeks until it was determined that he was sufficiently safe from self-harm to go home.<sup>21</sup>

The young man had wanted to die like Brittany Maynard.

**D. In Oregon, Other Suicides Have Increased with Legalization of Physician-Assisted Suicide**

Oregon government reports show the following positive

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<sup>15</sup> Declaration of Williard Johnston, MD, 5/24/16, attached at A-11 & A-12.

<sup>16</sup> Id., ¶2.

<sup>17</sup> Id.

<sup>18</sup> Id.

<sup>19</sup> Id.

<sup>20</sup> Id.

<sup>21</sup> Id., ¶4, infra at page A-12.





expense, which is ongoing.

Finally, there is the emotional cost of suicide. The most recent report from Oregon on conventional suicide states:

The financial and emotional impacts of suicide on family members and the broader community are devastating and long-lasting.<sup>33</sup>

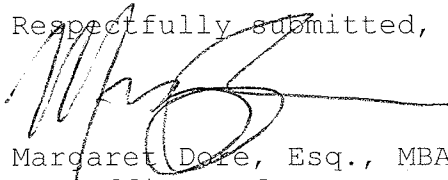
**F. The Significance for the District of Columbia**

The District of Columbia currently has the lowest suicide rate in the nation.<sup>34</sup> If Act 21-577 is enacted and the District of Columbia repeats the Oregon experience, this will change. The District will have increased suicide. The District will have financial and emotional cost. As in Oregon, the total cost could be enormous for the District of Columbia, which is a smaller population jurisdiction.

**IV. CONCLUSION**

The D.C. Council completely overlooked the issue of suicide contagion. Act 21-577 must be rejected to prevent suicide contagion and its potentially enormous financial and emotional cost. I urge you to reject Act 21-577.

Respectfully submitted,



Margaret Dore, Esq., MBA  
Law Offices of Margaret K. Dore, PS  
Choice is an Illusion,

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<sup>33</sup> Shen X, supra, attached hereto at A-19.

<sup>34</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Age-Adjusted Suicide Rates by State, 2012, attached hereto at A-24.



a nonprofit corporation  
[www.margaretdore.com](http://www.margaretdore.com)  
[www.choiceillusion.org](http://www.choiceillusion.org)  
1001 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Suite 4400  
Seattle, WA 98154  
206 389 1754 main reception  
206 697 1217 cell