

Oregon's Death With Dignity Legislation, UUs, and Medical Aid in Dying in CT: A Brief History

Unitarian Universalists (UUs) have a long and powerful history of belief and action promoting end-of-life options legislation. Back in 1988, way ahead of its time, UUA General Assembly voted a resolution stating in part: Unitarian Universalists <should> inform and petition legislators to support legislation that will create legal protection for the right to die with dignity, in accordance with one's own choice.

Oregon was the first state in the US to pass medical aid in dying legislation in **1994**. Leaders and members of First Unitarian in Portland were central to changing public policy regarding death-with-dignity. First UU Portland was a kind of home for the campaign leading up to its passage. All the drafting took place there, all the meetings. After the law was drafted, the congregation hosted press conferences to garner voter support; its ministers and lay leaders have been involved for decades. Let's look at some of those leaders.

First Unitarian's involvement began in the 1960s with its then-minister, the **Rev. Dr. Richard Steiner**, an early advocate of aid in dying. After he retired and became terminally ill, Steiner obtained medication that he used to end his life. His decision became a quiet part of the church's history.

The congregation's next long-serving minister, the **Rev. Dr. Alan Deale**, took up the cause. Deale spoke before the Oregon legislature in 1991, when state Senator Frank Roberts, who was dying of cancer, introduced a death with dignity bill. It failed—after scores of other clergy spoke in opposition. **Barbara Coombs Lee** worked for the legislature and attended that hearing. At the time she was unfamiliar with Unitarian Universalism, and then, in walked Rev. Deale. “Here comes this diminutive man with a bow tie who says, ‘My denomination promotes and supports this legislation. It is part of our theology, our doctrine of the inherent worth and dignity of every



Barbara Coombs Lee is president emerita/senior advisor of Compassion & Choices, She is also a member of First UU in Portland, OR.



The Reverend Dr. Alan Deale—distinguished preacher, church builder, strong institutionalist, social justice activist, and fighter for death with dignity—died on 29 January 2018, aged 90.

person, and it is what people deserve at the end of life,” Coombs Lee recalled. “I thought, ‘I’ve found my church.’”

“It’s a fascinating thing that it came out of the church so wholly,” said the **Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell**, who served as senior minister from 1992 to 2009. Coombs Lee took the campaign around Oregon and to the media to raise support among voters. Many other UUs gathered



Rev. William G. Sinkford, former UUA President, and recently retired (2022) Senior Minister at UU Portland.

signatures and did other grassroots work. “Choice and autonomy over one’s own life, including the right to refuse medical treatment when one is dying, are central to UU principles,”

said **The Rev. William G. Sinkford**. “Moreover, in contrast to some Christian traditions, there is a strong strain of Unitarian progressive theology which argues that the notion of suffering being redemptive was a wrong turn from the very beginning. It is true that we often suffer, and I don’t think it does anything toward saving us.”



Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell, Minister Emerita UU Portland

From Oregon to Connecticut

Advocates of the proposed [aid in dying](#) bill made an emotional plea to state legislators in Hartford on Wednesday, January 18, 2023, to approve the legislation, that has been introduced 15 times in Connecticut since 1994. **Dr. Saud Anwar**, Senate chair of the Public Health Committee, said the latest version of the bill addresses legal concerns raised by the Judiciary Committee last year to minimize the risk of misuse.

“The bill that we are looking at this year is going to be very different from the ones for the past many years,” he said.

“Last year was a huge disappointment for me,” said **Lynda Shannon Bluestein**, member since 1992 and past President of The Unitarian Church in Westport, and longtime advocate for medical aid in dying. My medical records declare that I am a cancer survivor – twice over no less. I got through treatment for breast cancer and malignant melanoma feeling confident and grateful. But in March 2021, I was diagnosed with late-stage Fallopian tube cancer. It is very rare. It is also the most lethal type of gynecologic cancer.



Lynda Shannon Bluestein

It has taken me getting sick to realize that having agency over the circumstances surrounding my own death is going to require me to get busy. Really busy, because I live in Connecticut, a state whose lawmakers have turned their backs on this issue for two decades and I am running out of time. Without passage of enabling legislation, I will have two choices when my life is near its end – stay in Connecticut and have no say in my own dying, or pack my bags and head to Vermont, establish residency, complete the paperwork required to invoke Act 39, Vermont’s medical aid in dying law and enter hospice care there.

In August 2022, with the support of Compassion and Choices lawyers, I [sued](#) Vermont for allowing only its own residents to take advantage of Act 39. My co-plaintiff in this lawsuit is Dr. Diana Barnard who wants to be able to offer the end-of-life option to her patients who live in New York, and to whom I will go for care if Connecticut does not get its act together in this legislative session. I learned in July that my cancer, in remission since August 2021, has recurred, and I will be starting Second Line chemotherapy in January. I want to live long enough to see this legislation pass in Connecticut for personal reasons, yes, but also for all the families like those who showed up in Hartford last week to plead with state legislators to finally get this done. It would be wonderful to have UUs show up in record numbers in support of this year’s try this bill.

#