



Editorials

Editorial: A legacy of service, a reminder of NM's aid-in-dying failure

By Albuquerque Journal Editorial Board

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Bill Johnson's two-minute video should be required viewing for every member of New Mexico's Legislature before the 2020 session begins.

By the time he recorded the video earlier this year, Johnson – former CEO of University of New Mexico Hospital and a former secretary of the state Human Services Department – had devoted years to making the state a better, healthier place. In 2017 he was diagnosed with ALS and knew full well what was to come, including the debilitating effects that accompany the terminal illness.

In the video Johnson, a Roman Catholic with decades of experience in the health care field, speaks with power and eloquence in support of the Elizabeth Whitefield End of Life Options Act, which would have legalized medical aid in dying in New Mexico had it passed this spring.

Thanks to the failure of that bill at the hands of New Mexico legislators, Johnson wasn't able to end his long, full life on his terms. He died Oct. 29, his 84th birthday, leaving behind a decades-long legacy of public service and leadership, as well as a loving family.

Lawmakers should remember that when Johnson needed them to be effective, they failed him, just like they failed Elizabeth Whitefield, the 2nd Judicial District judge for whom the aid-in-dying bill was named. Whitefield battled multiple cancers over many years. She rebounded time and again but knew chances were great cancer would win in the end, so

she asked legislators to support compassionate end-of-life legislation in 2017. She died last year – like Johnson, on lawmakers’ terms, not her own.

Johnson and Whitefield are just two New Mexicans who might have avoided needless suffering, and spared their families the ordeal of a front-row seat to it, through aid-in-dying protections. New Mexico knows of their illnesses and struggles because they were high-profile public figures and because, even at the end, they cared enough to sacrifice their own privacy in hope of inspiring a positive change. How many others are suffering today with no hope or chance of recovery, robbed of their opportunity to avoid unnecessary pain?

Aid in dying isn’t about assisted suicide or enabling people to run from their problems on a bad day. It’s about compassion and human decency for people who, with the expertise of their medical providers, know all too well their final days will be agonizing.

New Mexico legislators need to finally give serious consideration to an aid-in-dying bill. The 2017 and 2019 versions, sponsored by Rep. Deborah Armstrong, D-Albuquerque, and Sen. Elizabeth Stefanics, D-Santa Fe, never even made it out of committee. The bills, as past iterations have done, target those with terminal illnesses with just a few months to live. It should allow health care workers to opt out of treatment without penalty if their beliefs conflict with the practice. It should include requirements that prospective patients be given a thorough education on the process and that medical staff look for signs of coercion by others. The choice to medically avoid a protracted, painful, inevitable death is a grave, deeply personal matter that should be given proper consideration.

That’s what Whitefield and Johnson – who lived positive and productive lives, who wanted to spare their fellow New Mexicans the suffering that comes at the end of a terminal illness – did.

Watch Johnson’s video [here](#).

And ask your lawmakers when will we have had enough?

This editorial first appeared in the Albuquerque Journal. It was written by members of the editorial board and is unsigned as it represents the opinion of the newspaper rather than the writers.

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