

H. Philip West Jr.

March 31, 2026

Support 26-H 7760

The Honorable Carol Hagan McEntee, Chair
HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

Thank you, Chair McEntee and Members of the House Judiciary Committee, for considering 26-H 7760, the Lila Sapinsley Compassionate Care Act. Thanks also to Rep. Ajello, for sponsoring this important legislation, year after year.

My name is H. Philip West Jr. Over the past thirty-eight years, as director of Common Cause Rhode Island and in retirement, I have testified before this committee on bills many believed would make Rhode Island's government more accountable and more humane. Tonight, as a private citizen, I urge you to recommend 7760 for passage.

Lila and her husband John were longtime supporters of Common Cause, and I knew them well. I never talked to Lila about this legislation, but I know she was working on it in the days before she died.

I've outlived many people I cherished. I've sat by the bedsides of terminally ill friends and colleagues. I've watched them suffer with pain that palliative care could not control. I've wished I could take their pain even for an hour. I've grieved for them and given eulogies that helped me focus on the experience of dying.

Cancers run in my family. Cancers killed both of my grandmothers, my father, his twin brother, my mother's sister, and several first cousins or their children. Cancers killed my college roommate and his wife. Cancers killed members of this General Assembly with whom I worked closely over many years.

I owe my life to modern cancer researchers and oncologists at Miriam Hospital. Under their care I survived a malignant melanoma that would have killed me in any earlier generation. Non-Hodgkin lymphoma prompted me to retire from Common Cause, and it nearly killed me in 2009.

Cancers come in many guises and have many causes. Whether cancers start through exposure to carcinogens, pollutants, or exposure to ultraviolet radiation, they become increasingly common as we age.

Cancers and other terminal illnesses rob people of their memories, their identities, and their dignity. Too often, terminal illnesses bring relentless pain that medical professionals, despite their skill and dedication, cannot relieve. I have watched friends and colleagues die slowly, in agony, long after they themselves were ready for death.

You will hear arguments tonight why compassionate medical assistance in dying represents a "slippery slope." Most of these arguments are grounded not in medical evidence or in the text of this legislation, but in religious doctrine — specifically, beliefs about suicide and the sanctity of life.

Year after year, you've heard witnesses argue in various ways that God gives life and only God can decide when we die. Those arguments crash against the reality that modern medicine routinely keeps vital signs going long after they would have stopped if nature had taken its course.

As a society, we value freedom of choice. Yet too often, when it comes to how we die, we impose an agonizing answer: *No, you cannot decide for yourself; you must suffer until your body's final collapse.*

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I hope that this year Rhode Island will reaffirm Roger Williams’s wise and foundational principle that government cannot compel religious belief or practice and should not try. Rhode Island must stop enshrining any religious doctrine into law for all citizens.

Reliable data from the Pew Research Center that roughly 63% of Americans say that patients choosing to end their lives with the help of a doctor is either morally acceptable (34%) or not a moral issue (29%). Only 35% consider it morally wrong. Even among Catholics, a minority — only 40% — say medical assistance in dying is wrong (attached).

I am not afraid of death. What I think all of us fear is the relentless decline of dying — the loss of self, control, and dignity — when it serves no healing purpose and contradicts the wishes of the person who is dying.

In Rhode Island of all places, no one should be forced to endure the pain and humiliation of terminal dying because of religious doctrines imposed through secular law.

It’s time for Rhode Island to join the other thirteen states and the District of Columbia that have enacted procedures that allow physicians to prescribe medications that allow patients bring terminal illnesses to a peaceful end.

I respectfully urge you to recommend passage of 26-H 7760, the Lila Manfield Sapinsley Compassionate Care Act.

Respectfully submitted,



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Majorities across several religious groups say physician-assisted death is morally permissible

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