

Barbara Coombs Lee is president of Compassion & Choices, the nation's oldest and largest nonprofit organization working to improve care and expand choice at the end of life. Previously, she had a 25-year career as a nurse and physician assistant, during which she often cared for terminally ill patients. She attended many patients who suffered through fruitless procedures and prolonged stays in intensive care. As an emergency room and intensive care nurse, she was obligated to perform many painful and pointless interventions on dying patients.

Those unforgettable experiences drove her to pursue a career in law and health policy, and to devote her professional life to individual choice and empowerment in healthcare. As a private attorney, counsel to an Oregon State Senate committee and a managed-care executive, she has championed initiatives that allow individuals a full range of choices and much more agency in their healthcare decisions.



Within the Oregon Senate Healthcare and Bioethics committee in 1991, Barbara assisted [State Senator Frank Roberts](#) in his advocacy for one of the first aid-in-dying laws in the nation. Unfortunately, the committee never approved the bill, and Roberts died of prostate cancer in 1993, suffering the kind of slow, painful death his bill sought to help people avoid.

In 1994 Barbara co-authored and became one of three chief petitioners for the [Oregon Death with Dignity Act](#). She served as spokesperson through two statewide campaigns and spent 10 years defending the nation's first Death with Dignity law against attacks in both the judicial and legislative arenas.

In 2008, Barbara was senior advisor for the Washington State Death with Dignity ballot initiative voters approved by an 18-point margin, whereupon Washington became the second state to permit aid in dying. In 2009, the Montana Supreme Court ruled in the landmark case brought by Compassion & Choices ([Baxter v. Montana](#)) it is not against the state's public policy for a physician to provide aid in dying to a mentally competent, terminally ill adult. Compassion & Choices defeated bills in Montana that would have voided their Supreme Court ruling in 2011 and imprisoned doctors for providing aid in dying in 2013. Under her leadership [Compassion successfully pushed the California End of Life Option Act](#) in 2015.

Barbara has been interviewed by all leading media outlets. She has testified before the U.S. Congress. She has spoken in hundreds of venues over the past twenty-five years. She is a seasoned traveler and tireless firebrand.

She studied literature and nursing at Vassar College and Cornell University, and earned advanced degrees in law and medicine from the University of Washington and Lewis & Clark College. Barbara is a member of the Oregon State Bar.

Recent writing and speaking by Barbara Coombs Lee

- [“The Brittany Effect” – How One Woman Transformed the “Death with Dignity” Movement](#), TedX Marin, September 2015
- [Compassion and Choices: A conversation with Barbara Coombs Lee](#), Plato Society, November 2015
- [Oregon's experience with aid in dying: findings from the death with dignity laboratory](#), Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, July 2015