Activist Toolkit: Letter Writing Guide

A toolkit for volunteers, partners and supporters to use in writing letters to legislators and other public officials, and letters to the editor, in support of the medical aid-in-dying movement.

www.CompassionAndChoices.org    1-800-247-7421
Letter-Writing Is Activism 101

Writing letters may sound a bit old fashioned in the age of social media, but it is still one of the best ways to register your support (or opposition) to a piece of public policy, or contribute to the conversation with a letter to the editor, which virtually all media outlets publish regularly. This brief guide offers you some basic ideas and best practices for writing letters to the editor, as well as to your local, state and federal elected officials.

Letters to the editor:
Letters to the editor are one of the best ways to help educate people in your community about the importance of death with dignity and demonstrate constituent support for end-of-life choice to lawmakers. A well-written, timely letter can shift public opinion and influence policy.

Letters to officials:
Elected officials save, sort and count their mail. Every letter about death with dignity will be grouped and tallied to estimate support for either side of the issue. This is true for e-mail and phone calls as well, but actual hand-written letters are still the gold standard!
Writing a Letter to the Editor

You can write a letter in response to an article you see, either agreeing or disagreeing. Or you can write in about a major policy development, a community event or other noteworthy happening. You can write to your hometown papers, and you can also target outlets in other communities where death with dignity is being discussed. Just visit the news organization’s website and review their submission guidelines for letters to the editor—and follow them!

Four tips for writing letters to the editor:
1. **Send your letter as soon as possible** — ideally, within 48 hours of publication if you are responding to a published article, or within one week of a piece of news or an event.
2. **Keep your letter concise** — one to three points in 200 words or less (follow the guidelines on the news organization’s website for writing letters to the editor)
3. **Close with a thought for readers to remember.**
4. **Mention CompassionAndChoices.org or our toll-free number: 800-247-7421.**

Key Message Points:
*These are the most convincing points to stress the importance of access to aid in dying.*

1. Americans are free to choose how they live – and when the time comes, how they die.
2. End-of-life choices should be left to the individual, her family and/or doctor. The choices should be guided by medical standards and a medical process, not the whims of politicians or religious leaders.
3. Support for end-of-life choice is consistently strong – in red states, in blue states, across demographic groups and religions; this strong support has held steady for two decades.

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Dear Editor,

I am writing because I have noticed a continued lack of focus in our community and among our lawmakers on the crisis in end-of-life care for older and/or terminally ill Americans. Further, there are many instances of unwanted medical care being literally forced on helpless patients who are terminally ill, at the behest of their healthcare providers. There are too many perverse financial incentives for hospitals and hospices in the absence of meaningful regulation.

Our state does not have a death-with-dignity law like Oregon, Washington, Vermont and others. As a result, many patients are tormented by unwanted medical treatment at the end of life, which is pointless, and is often painful and inhumane.

Several states (Oregon, Washington, Vermont) have already enacted death-with-dignity laws, and it is past time we did so in our state as well. We must act before more Americans are victimized by inadequate end-of-life and hospice care—which is experiencing a surge in growth, largely among private, poorly regulated providers.

Sincerely,

John Q. Public
Commenting Online

While writing a letter to the editor takes a little time and effort, another way you can make an impact is by commenting directly on media articles that you see or read, thereby making sure that death with dignity is well represented to whomever reads the article—and the comments! There are often many comments, and not everyone reads them all. But raising your voice in this quick and simple way can help remind everyone of the powerful constituency for end-of-life choice and death with dignity.

A few tips:

1. You may have to register with the individual website or media outlet in order to comment; this is always free, but you need to provide an e-mail address.
2. It may take a few hours or a day for the editors to approve your post, but they almost always do, as long as the writer is reasonable and appropriate. So follow the same common sense guidelines as you would when writing formal letters.
3. Shop around: Once you’ve written a comment in favor of death with dignity, look for a few more articles on a related topic, and consider commenting once per week.
4. Remember to mention Compassion & Choices in your comment, and consider including a link to the C&C website, if that is allowed by the media outlet.
Writing Letters to Lawmakers

Writing letters to your elected representatives is another important way to help Compassion & Choices secure passage of death-with-dignity laws in every state. Letters should stress the importance of death with dignity and show lawmakers that their constituents support end-of-life autonomy. Legislative staff keep tallies on how many letters arrive on various issues and what position they express. Every letter you send (or your friends send) will be recorded, and over time, can have a tremendous impact.

Four tips for writing letters to elected officials:
1. Find contact information for your elected officials on:
   http://support.compassionandchoices.org/site/PageNavigator/AdvocacyTool.htm
2. Keep your letter concise — one to three points in 200 words or less.
3. Close with a reference to broad support in the community on this issue.
4. Always be courteous and respectful, and remember to mention Compassion & Choices.

Key message points:
These are important and convincing points to support the importance of access to aid in dying:

1. Americans are free to choose how they live – and when the time comes, how they die.
2. End-of-life choices should be left to the individual, his/her family and doctor. The choices should be guided by medical standards, not constrained by government.
3. Support for end-of-life choice is consistently strong – in red states, in blue states, across demographic groups and religions; this strong support has held steady for two decades.
4. Unwanted medical care at the end of life is painful and inhumane.

Dear Senator Smith,

I am writing because I am deeply concerned over the lack of attention given to those facing the end of life due to illness or age. Our laws are out of date, and do not protect the rights and freedoms of patients and citizens.

Further, there are many instances of unwanted medical care being literally forced on helpless patients who are terminally ill, at the behest of their healthcare providers. There are too many perverse financial incentives for hospitals and hospices in the absence of meaningful regulation.

Our state does not have a death-with-dignity law like Oregon, Washington, Vermont and others. As a result, many patients are tormented by unwanted medical treatment at the end of life, which is pointless, and is often painful and inhumane.

Please help us bring death with dignity and aid-in-dying laws to our state. This issue has broad support in our community, and Compassion & Choices has detailed recommendations for legislative language and policy considerations.

Sincerely,
Jane Q. Public
Make It an Activity

Sitting down and writing a letter by yourself is a great start. Now think about how to multiply your activism and really get some attention! Whether as part of a meeting, a social event, or just a gathering of a few friends for coffee or a glass of wine, it’s easy and fun to take ten minutes aside to ask everyone to write a letter in support of death with dignity. And when several letters arrive at once, it only heightens the impact and visibility of the issue wherever the letters are received.

A few tips:

1. Bring sheets of blank paper, envelopes, pens, and if you really want to get those letters moving, stamps!
2. Identify in advance who you want the letters to target (it can be more than one organization or official), and bring the relevant addresses for your friends.
3. Print out this Guide, or some sample letters to share, so everyone knows what a basic letter looks like.
4. Remember to mention Compassion & Choices in all the letters, and encourage everyone to consider including a personal anecdote or story, even if they don’t want to share it beyond the letter.