



**Volunteer Action Network
Toolkit:**

**COMMUNICATING
WITH
LEGISLATORS AND
THE MEDIA**

Communicating With Legislators and the Media

Having a robust team of active volunteers is critical to our success and continued progress. Advocates who contact lawmakers, participate on social media, write letters to the editor, or show up for hearings, lobby days and other legislative efforts in support of expanding end-of-life options are vital to the movement.

Writing letters is still one of the best ways to register your support for (or opposition to) a piece of public policy. You can contribute to the conversation with a letter to the editor, which virtually all media outlets publish in print and online regularly. This toolkit offers you some basics and best practices for writing letters to the editor as well as to your local, state and federal elected officials.

Key Points to Include in All Communications

All communication in support of medical aid in dying — whether on social media, in letters to the editor or with public officials — should stress the importance of access to the full spectrum of end-of-life options by focusing on one or two of the following points:

- 1. *Decisions about end-of-life treatments and options should be left to the individual.*** Together with their faith, family and physician, individuals should be allowed to make decisions based on their values and beliefs and guided by a medical standard of care, rather than the personal opinions or beliefs of others.
- 2. *Public support for end-of-life options is consistently strong.*** Across demographic groups, party lines, state politics and various religions, strong support for the option of medical aid in dying has held steady for more than two decades. Visit [our website](#) for polling numbers to cite and include.
- 3. *Medical aid in dying is not suicide, assisted suicide or euthanasia.*** People who seek medical aid in dying do not want to die but are stricken with a life-ending illness. Medical aid in dying allows them to avoid additional suffering by having some say in the timing and manner of their death. Visit [our website](#) for more details.
- 4. *Medical aid in dying is supported by major medical associations.*** Visit [our website](#) to see the growing number of medical associations with either a supportive position or a position of engaged neutrality.
- 5. *Recent headlines from Compassion & Choices in the news.*** Visit [our website](#) or check with a Compassion & Choices staff person to find more specific and current information to include.

Writing a Letter to the Editor

Letters to the editor help educate people in your community about the importance of end-of-life issues, including medical aid in dying, and demonstrate constituent support to lawmakers. A well-written, timely letter can shift public opinion, build consensus and influence policy.

You might write a letter in response to an article, either agreeing or disagreeing with the original article's point. You can write about a major policy development, community event or other noteworthy observance happening near you. Write to your local newspaper, a national newspaper or to an online publication covering end-of-life issues. When applicable, also consider writing to senior news, 55+ style magazines, weekly papers or other local or independent publications.

The tips below can help you write a letter to the editor that is more likely to be approved for publication. Once published in your local newspaper or online news media, letters can be promoted via social media and may gain attention from national news outlets.

- 1. Visit the news organization's website.** Review their submission guidelines for letters to the editor and be sure to follow them.
- 2. Send your letter as soon as possible.** If you are responding to a published article, ideally submit your letter within 48 hours of the original publication or within one week of an event that you attended, such as a hearing or community event.
- 3. Keep your letter concise.** Make one to three points in approximately 200 - 300 words or less (again, follow the guidelines on the news organization's website for writing letters to the editor). Guest columns and featured op-ed pieces usually have guidelines that allow for longer letters.
- 4. Title your letter.** If you submit a letter without a title, it will be titled for you by someone else.
- 5. Close with a thought for readers to remember.** It can be a compelling fact, a personal statement that's relevant to your audience or a call to action.
- 6. Mention Compassion & Choices.** This helps increase awareness of our work and mission. Feel free to direct the reader to CompassionAndChoices.org for more information.
- 7. If and when your letter is published, share it!** Post a link to your letter on Facebook and/or Tweet it out to your followers. Be sure to tag Compassion & Choices, and send a link to your C&C field staff so we can celebrate of all our published authors!

TIP: Most every publication will call or email to verify your identity before publishing. If you haven't been contacted within 2-3 days of submitting, contact the publication to follow up.

Online Comments and Social Media

While writing a letter to the editor takes some time and effort, another way you can make an immediate impact is through commenting directly on articles online and on social media. By commenting on a story, a public official's Facebook page or a social media post, you can help ensure medical aid in dying is accurately and factually represented.

These tips will help you increase your effectiveness for commenting online:

- 1. Register with the website or media outlet.** This is often required in order to comment on news stories or blog posts; registration is almost always free, but you'll need to provide an email address.
- 2. Follow the same guidelines for writing a letter to the editor.** It may take a few hours or longer for the editors to approve your post, but they almost always do, as long as the content is reasonable and appropriate.
- 3. Stick to the facts.** Social media is notorious for inspiring people who might not otherwise weigh in to respond with impunity. Stay above the fray; don't engage in personal attacks or philosophical arguments. Respond with the facts and move on.
- 4. Consider the source.** As misinformation abounds on social media, check that any article you post or comment on comes from a reputable source. Nothing hurts our cause more than spreading inaccurate or inflammatory information. When you cite statistics or mention a quote, try to also include a link to the original source.
- 5. Spread your message.** Once you've written a comment in favor of medical aid in dying, look for a few more articles on a related topic, and consider commenting regularly.
- 6. Remember to mention Compassion & Choices.** Include a link to CompassionAndChoices.org if you can.

TIP: Commenting online regularly helps keep the conversation going and may even put you in touch with people who want to get involved. As you run across people who support medical aid in dying as an end-of-life option, invite them to [sign up to volunteer](#) with us!

Writing to Elected Officials

Writing letters to your elected representatives is another important way to help Compassion & Choices advance the end-of-life choice movement. Letters should stress the importance of access to the full range of options 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 positions they express. Over time, the volume of letters on an issue has a tremendous influence.

Follow these tips so that the letters you send have the greatest impact.

- 1. Find contact information.** [Use this link to find your elected officials.](#)
- 2. Keep your letter concise.** As with letters to the editor, choose one to three points to make in 200-300 words.
- 3. Make it personal.** Write from your heart and include your reason(s) for supporting medical aid in dying for the terminally ill.
- 4. Always be courteous and respectful.** The tone in letters to lawmakers should be as carefully considered as words used at in-person meetings. Thank them for their service at the beginning or the end of your letter.
- 5. Mention Compassion & Choices.** Send the reader to CompassionAndChoices.org and/or enclose a [fact sheet](#) relevant to the issues addressed in your letter.

Make Letter Writing a Group 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 few friends meeting for refreshments, consider setting aside 10 minutes at the gathering to ask everyone to write a letter in support of medical aid in dying. When several letters arrive at once, it heightens the impact and visibility of the issue. Below you'll find a few tips on hosting a letter-writing party:

- 1. Provide supplies.** Make sure you have plenty of paper, envelopes, postcards, pens and stamps.
- 2. Identify in advance who to target and what to say.** You can choose to target more than one official; be sure to bring the relevant addresses and appropriate bill information if applicable. If you need help with this, contact Compassion & Choices staff for specifics about your state.
- 3. Print this guide.** Or bring some sample letters to share so everyone knows what a basic letter looks like and which messages they should include.

- 4. *Mention Compassion & Choices.*** This can help the recipients make the connection between all of our efforts and understand Compassion & Choices' role in building an effective coalition. Also enclose relevant fact sheets if appropriate and reference our website: CompassionAndChoices.org.
- 5. *Encourage everyone to consider including a personal anecdote or story.*** It can be their own, about someone they know or a more public example. A real story personalizes your letter and illustrates the importance of the issue in a way that facts or statistics cannot.
- 6. *Organize an online letter-writing party.*** Consider emailing a group of friends with whom you regularly socialize or discuss important issues. Attach the relevant Compassion & Choices fact sheets and a sample letter with guidance on where to send it.

Interviews With Reporters, Newspapers and Media Outlets

Compassion & Choices volunteers who will be interviewed by the media should complete special messaging and public speaking trainings. Begin by reviewing and signing the Media Policy and Confidentiality Agreements and informing Compassion & Choices of any media contact or inquiries. Please contact Compassion & Choices field staff for messaging and public speaking training.

Let Us Know About Your Activity

Visit the Volunteer Resource Center and log all your volunteer activity so that we can celebrate and count it! [Our online tool](#) is the best way to help us track all the ways volunteers across the country are taking action.

Thank you!

Once again, we're so grateful that you've chosen Compassion & Choices as a place to invest your time, energy and talent as a volunteer. People like you make change happen!

Sample letters can be found on the following pages.

Resources

Sample Letter to a Legislator

Dear **YourLawmaker**,

Citizens of **YourState** should be free to choose how they live – and when the time comes, how they die. This private, personal decision should belong to all of us, free from government interference.

NameBill# would allow a terminally ill, mentally capable adult to request medication from a doctor that the person may self-administer at a time of his or her choosing, should suffering become unbearable.

Nine other states and Washington, D.C., (22% of the population nationwide) have authorized medical aid in dying, and the time is now for **YourState** to provide this option for the terminally ill. Too many suffer needlessly, endure unrelenting pain, or resort to violent means at the end of life, when medical aid could help them die peacefully.

Please vote yes on **BillName#** and allow people who are terminally ill and of sound mind, to consider this end-of-life option.

Our laws need to evolve so that we protect the decisions and freedoms of patients and citizens at the end of their lives. The time has come for the citizens of **YourState** to have access to this compassionate option. I urge you to vote YES on **BillName#**. Thank you for your service to our state, **Your Lawmaker**.

Sincerely,
YourName

Sample Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

I had not given my options for end-of-life care much thought until recently. A close family member was diagnosed with a terminal illness. We all witnessed our loved one suffering unbearably during the final stages of their disease, and it prompted an important dialogue.

Terminally ill residents of **YourState** should have the option, together with their faith, family and physician, to make the end-of-life care decisions that are right for them — decisions that align with their values, priorities and beliefs. These options should include the ability to request a prescription from their doctor for medication, which they can decide to take or not, to end their dying process peacefully if their suffering becomes unbearable.

I stand with strong majorities of Americans who believe in self-determination, privacy and autonomy at the end of life. Currently, 10 jurisdictions in the United States allow medical aid in dying; those jurisdictions comprise over 22% of the population, meaning 1 in 5 people have this compassionate option. More information, details, polling and fact sheets can be found at www.compassionandchoices.org.

It is not for me to judge someone else's decision about how they die or how much suffering they must endure. And I feel the same applies to people who would not choose the option of medical aid in dying judging me. This is an intensely personal decision, and I believe it is up to the individual to determine what quality of life means to them, and for physicians to support the dying person's decision.

More and more states are making medical aid in dying available for the terminally ill. **YourState** citizens should have this option. Please join me in urging our state legislators to pass **(BillName#)**.

Sincerely,
YourName