



# Submission to the Special Joint Committee on Physician-Assisted Death

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February 2016

The Salvation Army provides long term, palliative and hospice care for some of Canada's most vulnerable people. Every day, our health and social service facilities reach out to those facing significant challenges, including the suffering of mind and body.

The Salvation Army calls on the Government of Canada to:

1. respect the sanctity of human life and protect marginalized and vulnerable people
2. protect the conscience of individuals as well as facilities and the organizations that operate them with respect to the provision of physician-assisted death
3. embrace this opportunity to ensure all Canadians have access to palliative care

### **Sanctity of Human life and Protection of Marginalized and Vulnerable People**

In our social services, health-care facilities and community engagement, we witnessed the struggles facing more than 1.85 million Canadians who accessed The Salvation Army last year.

Your committee has heard evidence that increased access to palliative care as well as disability, chronic-disease and mental-health services, has significantly reduced the number of people who seek physician-assisted death in other jurisdictions. Furthermore, these hearings have repeatedly emphasized the need for records collection and data analysis so that mistakes may be monitored if physician-assisted death becomes a reality.

We submit that it is not enough to monitor mistakes and we ask for an intentionally restrictive regime surrounding physician-assisted death to prevent mistakes and protect vulnerable populations. The risks surrounding physician-assisted death are too serious to simply monitor errors and amend them as we go. Mistakes cannot be undone.

### **Protection of Conscience of Individuals and Health-Care Facilities**

The development of a system that permits access to physician-assisted death while simultaneously protecting the right of conscience and the right to life of vulnerable people will require careful balancing. The Salvation Army submits that the right of conscience exists not only for physicians but for health-care facilities and the organizations that operate them. Recognizing a right of conscience for institutions would not result in the denial of a patient's Charter right; rather it would be the same as for a health practitioner exercising their right of conscience. The institution would do everything necessary to ensure the patient receives the desired care and would ensure the transfer of care in an expedient and compassionate manner should physician assisted death be desired.

One of the objectives of *Carter* was to balance the right of access to physician-assisted death with the right of conscience for those who do not wish to participate. Permitting some facilities to be exempt from providing physician-assisted death will not limit access in a meaningful way. Rather, allowing for institutions to be exempt will offer protection to the conscience, morality and beliefs of patients, health-care providers and organizations who do not wish to engage with physician-assisted death. We note that several other jurisdictions such as Washington and Oregon offer health facilities or health care providers the option to decline from participating in physician-assisted death.

### **Palliative Care in Canada**

The Salvation Army recognizes and works to protect the inherent human dignity of each person and particularly society's most vulnerable. We remain committed to compassionately journeying with

individuals through to their natural death at our long-term care facilities and hospices. The Salvation Army believes that health-care facilities should be able to provide individuals and their families with a safe and trustworthy environment that excludes physician-assisted death. The goal of our palliative care is to provide comfort, dignity and quality of life for the person living with illness as well as their family-members. Palliative care that includes euthanasia or physician-assisted death is incompatible with our beliefs regarding the sacredness and sanctity of life. The Salvation Army, therefore, calls on governments to permit health facilities with conscience objections to be exempt from providing physician-assisted death services.

The Salvation Army believes that respect for the dignity of human life demands quality care for all persons at the end of their lives. We promote access to palliative care that provides holistic care (physical, emotional, psychological, social and spiritual) when a cure is no longer medically possible. The Salvation Army recognizes that leaving this life will always be coupled with grief and that palliative care can address many of the physical symptoms and emotional realities present at the end of life. Individuals must have access to palliative and hospice care that guarantees the facility will journey with them through to the end of their natural lives.

### **Conclusion**

We recognize there are many other practical considerations, as physician-assisted death becomes a reality in Canada. The Salvation Army in Canada therefore calls on Government to:

1. Respect the sanctity of life and protect the vulnerable and marginalized people of our society
2. Ensure the protection of the conscience of individuals as well as facilities with respect to the provision of physician-assisted death so that individuals who choose not to participate may do so in a trustworthy and safe environment where physician-assisted death is not present
3. Improve access to palliative-care services as well as other patient services, including mental-health care and support for people with disabilities

### **About The Salvation Army:**

The Salvation Army is an international Christian organization that began its work in Canada in 1882 and has grown to become the largest non-governmental direct provider of social services in the country. The Salvation Army gives hope and support to vulnerable people in 400 communities across Canada and more than 125 countries around the world. The Salvation Army offers practical assistance for children and families, often tending to the basic necessities of life, providing shelter for homeless people and rehabilitation for people who have lost control of their lives to an addiction. The Salvation Army is committed to a better future for marginalized and overlooked Canadians all across our land.