

The Rise and Rise of America's Suicide Lobby

George Soros and other funders use money, media, laws, and language to encourage fewer humans

By Neil Maghami

(Note: This edition of *Foundation Watch* updates an earlier report on the pro-assisted suicide movement. For further background, please see “Universal Hemlock Care: America’s Suicide Lobby” in the September 2009 *Organization Trends*).

Summary: *In the last 25 years, the assisted suicide lobby has amassed numerous victories as it reshapes the American way of life—and death. With plenty of financial help from radical billionaire George Soros, the lobby has used tax-exempt nonprofit groups to advance its agenda not only by working to change legislation, but also reframing how the media discusses assisted suicide. And once Obamacare transforms health care, the pressures for fewer human beings to consume government aid will only build.*



Billionaire misanthrope George Soros

The year 2016 marks a major anniversary for the pro-assisted suicide lobby: It’s been 25 years since the movement launched itself as a national force through the publication of Derek Humphry’s controversial bestseller *Final Exit*, a how-to guide for terminally ill individuals wishing to end their own lives. To “celebrate” the book’s arrival in print (if that is the right term),

January 2, 2016, was proclaimed “Death with Dignity Day” by movement activists.

With persistence, a disciplined approach to communications, and steady fundraising from big donors, the pro-assisted suicide movement has made extensive inroads over the last quarter century. It claimed another victory in October 2015, when California Gov. Jerry Brown (D) signed the End of

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Life Option Act, authorizing physicians in his state to “provide lethal prescriptions to mentally competent adults who have been diagnosed with a terminal illness and face the expectation that they will die within six months,” the *Los Angeles Times* reported.

The movement’s victory in the Golden State is a measure of its success in shifting the terms of the debate over assisted suicide. In 1991, Californians decisively rejected Proposition 161, which would have allowed terminally ill adults to request “aid-in-dying” from their physicians. Two other attempts to pass assisted suicide legislation in California failed, first in 1997 and again in 2005.

Much of the movement’s success can be attributed to its strategic use of tax-exempt nonprofits to promote its agenda and fight its legal, legislative, and public relations battles. While the financial resources marshaled under the lobby’s banners seem modest, especially when compared to those available to big environmentalist groups or Big Labor, it would be a mistake to assume the move-

ment is therefore weak. While its resources may seem limited, it has found ways to make full use of them to bring desired changes at the state level.

Following the Money

Not surprisingly, much of the money sustaining so-called right to die groups in the United States comes from arch-leftist billionaire George Soros, who has spent decades bankrolling all manner of social-engineering schemes.

American medicine is far too focused on preserving life, Soros said around the time his Open Society Institute created the “Project on Death in America” (PDIA), which operated from 1994 to 2003. “We have created a medical culture so intent on curing disease and prolonging life that it fails to provide support during one of life’s most emphatic phases—death. Advances in high technology interventions have deluded doctors and patients alike into believing that the inevitable can be delayed almost indefinitely.”

Anne Hendershott, a distinguished visiting professor of public affairs at King’s College in New York City, wrote that Soros acknowledged his admiration for his mother’s having “joined the Hemlock Society,” the original assisted-suicide activist group. Soros said his mother “had at her hand the means of doing away with herself.” He remembers asking her “if she needed my help” (*Washington Examiner*, April 4, 2013). (Hendershott is also author of *The Politics of Deviance*, which Encounter Books published in 2004.)

According to the Open Society Institute, the Project on Death In America “worked to understand and transform the culture and experience of dying and bereavement. Over the course of nine years, PDIA created funding initiatives in professional and public education, the arts, research, clinical care, and public policy. PDIA and its grantees

have helped build and shape this important and growing field, and have helped place improved care for the dying on the public agenda.”

Academic David Clark, director of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Glasgow, wrote a book on the group, *Transforming the Culture of Dying: The Work of the Project on Death in America*, published in 2013 by Oxford University Press, USA. He writes on one of his school’s websites that PDIA started off fairly modestly:

“Some \$15 million was to be set aside over three years with the goal of improving the experience of death and dying in the United States. The board didn’t know it at the time, but they would eventually be given three times that amount across the whole lifetime of the project.”

The death-worshippers have managed to accomplish quite a lot with only a little money, and Soros has anted up a good chunk of that cash, directing it to assisted-suicide advocacy organizations. Through his philanthropies, Open Society Institute and Foundation to Promote Open Society, Soros has given \$7,027,000 to Compassion & Choices since 2008. Two other big donors to the groups are the Kohlberg Foundation (\$6,575,000 since 2005) and the Irene Diamond Fund (\$5,167,916 from 2005 until 2012, when it closed its doors).

Open Society Institute has handed over \$540,000 to the Death with Dignity National Center since 1999. Other donors to the group include the Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation (\$305,000 since 2000) and Ben & Jerry’s Foundation (\$5,000 since 2010).

A Top-Down View of the Movement

Perhaps the best way to understand the pro-assisted suicide movement is to take a

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“Dr. Death,” assisted suicide pioneer Jack Kevorkian, in a 1999 mug shot.

top-down, national view of its activities as mediated through its various tax-exempt arms. The movement’s activities are organized primarily through three tax-exempt groups: Compassion and Choices (which focuses on shifting cultural perceptions of assisted suicide and legislative change); Death with Dignity National Center (more directly focused on legislative change); and the Final Exit Network (which actively provides “counsel” to those individuals seeking to end their own lives).

Compassion and Choices (C&C)
Headquartered in Denver, Colo., this tax-exempt group reported \$17,996,267 in total revenues (including contributions and investment income) for the year ending June
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30, 2014. That same year, the most recent available, it spent \$10.9 million and still had \$20.8 million in net assets. Its stated mission is to “expand choice at the end of life” and to “support, educate and advocate” to that end. It claims to have more than 400,000 members. C&C grew out of a 2005 merger of two pro-assisted suicide organizations.

In terms of its activities, it disclosed expenditures of:

*\$4 million “to promote awareness and education relating to end of life choices through [its] website, quarterly magazine, conventions/conferences, pamphlets and brochures, books and videos” and publishing articles (compared to \$2.8 million for

the same purpose in the year ending June 30, 2013);

*\$2.3 million on “advocacy for individuals through creative legal and legislative initiatives to secure comprehensive and compassionate options at the end of life” (compared to \$1.7 million the previous year for the same purpose); and

*\$1 million to “provide our members with resources to help them and their loved ones maintain control of the final chapters of their lives” (compared to \$858,000 in 2012 for the same purpose)

Between 2010 and 2013, C&C reported spending a total of \$962,000 on lobbying

activities. In 2013, for example, it spent \$134,000 on “grassroots lobbying” to influence public opinion, and \$391,000 “to influence a legislative body.” In 2012, the breakdown was \$51,000 for grassroots lobbying and \$336,000 on legislative lobbying.

To get a further sense of the scale of C&C’s efforts to promote assisted suicide, it’s worth recalling the portion of its 2014 annual report outlining its plans in California:

Compassion & Choices has built an A+ California team with an ambitious goal: to make death with dignity an open, accessible and legitimate medical practice in the Golden State.

Toni Broaddus leads the campaign. A respected Stanford-educated attorney and social-justice advocate, Toni has furthered ballot measures, state and federal legislation, and impact litigation. Charmaine Manansala brings national experience as our California campaign political director.

The first phase of our campaign is urging people to take action in their communities. *Advocates are speaking out and collecting signatures at area house parties, farmers markets and other public gatherings. Deploying a county-by-county strategy, the field team is recruiting and training activists across the state.* [emphasis added]

Currently we have organizers in Los Angeles, Santa Barbara and San Mateo Counties. They have gathered thousands of petitions in support of death with dignity, hosted tabling and educational events, and built relationships with allied organizations. They’ve also *begun meeting with local officials and prosecutors.* [emphasis added]

We are also discussing end-of-life choices with influential and philanthropic members throughout the state. Patricia A. González-Portillo, a veteran journalist and former editor of *La Opinión*, the largest Spanish-language newspaper in the United States, leads communications for the campaign. Her team is working with supporters to ensure their stories and voices resonate in mainstream, social and multicultural media throughout California.

And the 2015 annual report provides further information—including a reference to how C&C trained “1,060 volunteers, made 1,329 legislative visits and held 465 events” to promote the End of Life Option Act legislation signed by Gov. Brown. C&C also “identified and supported” a group of “122 storytellers” who spoke about “death with dignity” while participating in meetings with “legislators and reporters” organized by C&C staff.

A big part of C&C’s California campaign centered on Brittany Maynard. Maynard, a 29-year-old Californian, came to prominence through a six-minute video posted online in October 2014. The video explained how Maynard, after being diagnosed with terminal brain cancer, was moving to Portland, Ore., with her mother and husband. Why? Because she wanted, in light of her condition, to have the option of ending her life with doctor-prescribed medication as permitted under Oregon law (but not in California). The video included comments from Maynard’s mother and husband expressing support for her decision.

Maynard’s story instantly garnered national attention. C&C claims her video was viewed more than 3 million times in the first 72 hours after it was posted. Maynard killed herself on Nov. 1, 2014, in the presence of her family. C&C proclaimed her “a heroine”

and vowed to “shout Brittany’s story from the mountaintops toward our shared goal of guaranteeing end-of-life liberty for all.”

C&C made full use of Maynard’s story for maximum public relations value, as described in its 2015 annual report. It created an Internet microsite targeting journalists covering the California debate (www.thebrittanyfund.org) and also ensuring that *People Magazine* had Maynard’s personal story as an exclusive. The groundswell generated around Maynard’s story, in C&C’s view, was essential to the passage of the End of Life Option Act.

Death with Dignity National Center Based in Portland, Ore., this organization boasts that it brings “a unique brand of advocacy and political strategy to end-of-life care policy reform.” Death with Dignity focuses on “insider organizing with politically savvy legislative and community leaders who are endeavoring to enact Death with Dignity statutes the state legislative process” and “behind-the-scenes political work necessary to move controversial legislation through the political process.”

This includes the organization’s work with other pro-assisted suicide groups everywhere from Illinois, Maine, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Texas, and Virginia to Arizona, Massachusetts, and Michigan.

Like Compassion and Choices, Death with Dignity is the result of a merger in 2003 of two pro-assisted suicide groups (both based in Oregon). Death with Dignity reported total revenues of \$557,000 in its 2014 IRS filing. Significant expenditures included the following:

*Just under \$81,000 to share its “expertise in public policy analysis to citizens, public officials and end-of-life experts interested in

the Oregon, Washington and Vermont death with dignity experience [*sic*]” and to provide “information about the latest statistics and research.” (That compares with \$137,000 in 2013.)

*\$177,000 to provide “information and educational materials about aid in dying and death with dignity standards and practices to individuals nationwide” and to respond “to requests for information [and] referrals to terminally ill individuals and their family members about a wide range of end-of-life issues.” (That compares with \$133,000 in 2013.)

*\$67,000 to promote “death with dignity laws based on our model legislation.” (That compares with \$54,000 in 2013.)

Death with Dignity’s 2013 annual report noted with regret that the organization was left with just \$274,000 in net assets at year’s end. This was because, as its president, Steve Telfer, acknowledged in his opening message, the group “gave everything we could to support” a failed 2012 effort to pass an assisted suicide law in Massachusetts. This Bay State ballot initiative, known as “Question 2,” went down to defeat in November 2012.

Telfer added: “Throwing our whole support behind Massachusetts led to a short-term undesirable financial position, as you will note in our financial statements included herein. However, we are confident we will recover quickly, and more importantly, with so much at stake, it was the right decision for the movement....”

Death with Dignity used its website in 2015 to encourage supporters to send pre-written letters to California legislators urging passage of that state’s End of Life Option Act. When Jerry Brown signed the bill into law,

Death with Dignity vice president George Eighmey crowed that:

“The magnitude of our victory cannot be understated. All along the West Coast qualified individuals now have the option to die with dignity at the time when polls show that more and more people across the nation want to make their own decisions about how to live their last days.”

Final Exit Network (FEN)

FEN’s stated objectives are “to serve those who are suffering intolerably from an incurable condition which has become more than they can bear and to increase the awareness of all Americans concerning their basic human right to a death with dignity.”

In 2013, it disclosed total revenues of \$312,000 (compared to \$922,000 in 2012), and reported net assets of \$976,000 (compared to \$886,000 in 2012). FEN’s history links back to the grandfather of all pro-assisted suicide groups, the Hemlock Society, founded in 1980. (For further background, please see “Universal Hemlock Care: America’s Suicide Lobby,” September 2009 *Organization Trends*.)

Under its statement of functional expenses on its latest IRS disclosures, FEN reports as a line item something described as “Exit Guide Training”: \$24,000 in 2013, and just under \$17,000 in 2012.

What are “Exit Guides” and what is FEN “training” them to do? An item inviting people in the Chicago area to participate in “exit guide” training that appeared in FEN’s winter 2015 newsletter provides further detail:

Exit guide services lie among those at the heart of Final Exit Network and are offered by trained, committed and com-

passionate volunteer members of FEN. If you see yourself in this description, you may want to apply for training as an exit guide.

This Chicago training is expected to be small, limited to applicants living in the eastern or midwestern states. We need people who are able and willing to travel, sometimes on short notice, those with flexibility to adapt to changing situations, detail-minded people, who have the willingness to put first the member being served, and who can communicate with empathy and kindness. It is crucial to have guides who will make a commitment to a case, once accepted.

It all seems very mysterious. But a May 2015 jury verdict in Hastings, Michigan, can help us understand what is really going on. That’s where FEN was convicted of assisting in the 2007 suicide of Doreen Dunn, who had been living with chronic pain (related to a medical procedure) and depression for many years but—it should be pointed out—was not terminally ill.

As CBS News reported, “prosecutors argued at trial that Dunn didn’t know how to take her life until agents of Final Exit Network provided her with a ‘blueprint’ to commit suicide.” The CBS story added:

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Scott Walter, President

“They go beyond simply advocating a person’s right to choose,” Dakota County prosecutor Phil Prokopowicz told jurors during closing arguments. “This is an organization that directly connects to its members and provides them with the knowledge and means to take their own life. And in the state of Minnesota, that is where the line is crossed.”

“According to trial testimony, Dunn’s husband arrived home on May 30, 2007, to find his wife dead on the couch. The family and medical examiner initially thought she died from natural causes. But information uncovered during a 2009 investigation in Georgia revealed that Dunn had joined Final Exit Network and that two other members—Jerry Dincin and Dr. Larry Egbert, the group’s former medical director—were with her the day she died. *Equipment she used to take her life by helium asphyxiation, the group’s preferred method of suicide, had been removed from the scene...* [emphasis added]

Former Final Exit Network president and founder Thomas Goodwin testified that the group agrees to support someone during a “self deliverance” only when that person is suffering from unbearable pain and meets other criteria.

Goodwin testified that “exit guides” would sometimes provide information on *where someone could obtain equipment to commit suicide by helium asphyxiation and even have a rehearsal to show someone how to properly set up the gear.* But he said the group’s founders were aware of various assisted-suicide laws and “would push the envelope” but were careful to “stay within the law as we knew it.” [emphasis added]

In August 2015, the Dunn case came to a formal close as FEN was fined \$30,000 by a judge, who also ordered the group to pay court costs and \$3,000 in restitution. FEN’s legal defeat seems even more improbable when you recall that the presiding judge agreed with FEN’s attorney, and ruled that the prosecution could not introduce evidence of Dunn’s depression.

The conviction helped Dunn’s family turn the page on a painful chapter in their lives. They had been caught off-guard by Dunn’s sudden death, the prosecution pointed out, which came just before “her daughter was scheduled to come home from Africa after being away more than a year. Her son’s fiancée was [also] scheduled to have a C-section that week,” the Associated Press reported in covering the trial.

The AP also reported how Dunn’s husband testified that his wife “couldn’t open jars or medicine bottles, had trouble raising her hands over her head and couldn’t lift anything heavier than a book” and “spent her days lying on the couch in the dark.”

As for the method of Dunn’s suicide, why does FEN advise helium asphyxiation? One reason could be that the helium will not be detected during a medical examiner’s investigation. That’s on top of FEN’s practice of removing all evidence from the scene of one of its “exits”—“thereby deceiving not only our law enforcement officials and medical examiners, but even more importantly, deceiving the spouse and children whom the deceased has left behind,” in Dakota County attorney James Backstrom’s words. (For further chilling details about FEN’s activities in Minnesota, see Backstrom’s 2012 statement about the Dunn case, available online

at <https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/LawJustice/.../DunnDoreenStatement.pdf>.)

There’s a word for FEN deciding to advertise its “training” in “exit guide services.” The word—and it is the only word for it—is “ghoulish.”

Framing the Debate

FEN may not have much time for investing in awareness campaigns or networking with legislators to pass assisted suicide laws. Compassion & Choices and Death with Dignity, by contrast, are intensely concerned with shaping public perceptions of assisted suicide.

Ed Gogol, a pro-assisted suicide activist in Illinois, published a strategy paper in 2015 that helps those outside the movement make sense of its careful attention to language. A portion of the paper that illustrates this point is reproduced below:

We never call it “suicide” or “physician-assisted suicide,” because in our society, suicide has very negative associations. It is often understood to mean the irrational act of a mentally ill person or a teenager with everything to live for. That’s the exact opposite of the act of a rational person who chooses to hasten his or her death to avoid suffering through the horrible final stages of a disease at end of life.

In fact, the Oregon, Washington, and Vermont laws all explicitly define the act as not committing suicide. The Oregon law specifically says that actions taken “... shall not, for any purpose, constitute suicide, assisted suicide, mercy killing or homicide, under the law.” If you take advantage of these laws, your death cer-

tificate will list your underlying illnesses as the cause of death—not suicide, and no life insurance contract will be affected.

A Gallup poll in May 2013 found that 70% of Americans favor allowing doctors to hasten a terminally ill patient's death when it is described as allowing doctors to "end the patient's life by some painless means." However only 51% support it when the process is described as doctors helping a patient "commit suicide." (emphasis added)

Our opponents commonly use the word "suicide" because of its negative implications—so we must make an effort to avoid that term. *Instead, say "aid-in-dying" or "death with dignity" or "physician-assisted dying" or "physician aid-in-dying."* (emphasis added)

The movement has been sensitive to this matter for some years. Compassion & Choices' 2008 annual report boasted that its members that year had "submitted 2,684 Letters to the Editor" and "successfully changed more than 200 headlines from 'Assisted- Suicide' to 'Aid in Dying' or 'Death with Dignity.'"

C&C has also posted a media kit online that demands an end to use of the term "assisted suicide," saying it is "politicized language that implies a value judgment and carries with it a social stigma" and urging media to stick to C&C-approved alternatives such as "aid in dying" as "accurate, value neutral, and understandable."

Conclusion

In 1994, the man who did more than any other individual to put the debate over assisted suicide front and center, Dr. Jack Kevorkian,

was quoted in a news story describing himself as a "medical policeman." What Kevorkian meant by this odd turn of phrase isn't clear; perhaps he meant that he was only directing "traffic" in the form of people seeking relief for terminal pain to the available options. That is to say, he wasn't counseling anyone to take a particular road or path, merely helping them to decide where to go.

Organizationally speaking, the posture of Compassion & Choices, Death with Dignity, and Final Exit Network is not all that different from Kevorkian's: they want to portray their promotion of assisted suicide as a "value neutral" option, the same way Kevorkian seemed to believe his own efforts were essentially value neutral. They too have adopted, in their own respective ways, the role of neutral guiders of traffic.

There is no future in unnatural death and no prospect of large profits in assisted suicide unless it were to be carried out on a *Soylent Green* scale. The movement's pre-eminent funder, George Soros, poses as a neutral party, merely giving people the option of ending their lives prematurely.

But Soros has Malthusian tendencies, and he is willing to put his money where his mouth is. He thinks more human deaths are good for the planet, which helps to explain his support for socialized medicine, a public policy that is guaranteed to create pressures for fewer persons to need health care. For now, this public posture has served the movement very well, as its growing influence demonstrates and as does the media's readiness to lend an ear to its arguments about the "right to die."

A few more court verdicts like the one in Minnesota, however, may begin to change the public's view of the movement, particularly if the verdicts receive sustained media notice. The suicide lobby may like to talk loudly about the need for a "value neutral" perspective of end-of-life choices, but it's impossible to be "value neutral" about Ms. Dunn's case or FEN's role in it.

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PhilanthropyNotes

Former conservative journalist **David Brock** has built an empire of activist groups since he went over to the Left years ago. Once an avowed enemy of the Clintons, he's now their best buddy, wielding influence by churning out a constant stream of pro-**Hillary Clinton** propaganda. He's created a bunch of groups that play a big role in politics, including **Media Matters for America** and the **Correct the Record** super PAC, and he's steered money to leftist causes through **George Soros's Democracy Alliance**. Some call this network the "**Brocktopus**." But Brock's scorched-earth offensive against insurgent Democrat contender Bernie Sanders is giving Democrat insiders heartburn, according to *The Hill* newspaper. Clinton donors, fundraisers, and operatives are concerned "about Brock's comments, particularly some of his attacks on Bernie Sanders." Key players worry Brock could be damaging her image and hurting her presidential chances. Brock planned to raise questions about 74-year-old Sanders's health until **Center for American Progress** founder and Clinton campaign chairman **John Podesta** told him on Twitter to "Chill out. We're fighting on who would make a better President, not on who has a better Physical Fitness Test."

Facebook CEO **Mark Zuckerberg** scolded employees for replacing "Black Lives Matter" slogans with "All Lives Matter" on walls at corporate headquarters in San Francisco, *Breitbart News* reports. Zuckerberg told workers what they did was "malicious" and "disrespectful," reminding them that there are "specific issues affecting the black community in the United States." He added, "This has been a deeply hurtful and tiresome experience for the black community and really the entire Facebook community, and we are now investigating the current incidents." **Twitter** CEO **Jack Dorsey** is also a Black Lives Matter supporter.

Donations to the **University of Missouri's** athletic department took a big hit after a losing football season in which the team threatened to boycott games in order to support student protests over spurious racist incidents on campus, the *Columbia Daily Tribune* reports. This past December the athletic department took in only \$191,000, compared to the \$685,000 it received the previous December after Mizzou's football team won a second consecutive SEC East title. "The decline in donations is being felt by the academic side of university fundraising, as well," the newspaper reports. "New pledges and donations overall fell \$6 million in December, usually one of the biggest months because donors are planning their tax deductions."

Dan Cardinali will become the new CEO at **Independent Sector** effective July 5, replacing a triumvirate of executives that ruled there since **Diana Aviv** quit to head up **Feeding America** in October. Cardinali has been president of **Communities In Schools** since 2004, a group touted as the nation's largest dropout prevention organization. He also worked as a community organizer in Guadalajara, Mexico, and obtained a one-year research fellowship at the **Woodstock Theological Center** at **Georgetown University**.

Goldman Sachs WATCH

The campaign of class-warrior Hillary Clinton is pushing the panic button over the prospective release of secret transcripts of high-dollar speeches she made to Goldman Sachs that threaten to portray her as a two-faced un-progressive Wall Street elitist out of touch with the common people. The transcripts of three speeches for which Goldman paid her an astonishing \$675,000 threaten to torpedo the false, focus group-friendly image she has cultivated. In the speeches to her fellow one-percenters, she reportedly comes across as unduly cozy with the financial titans that her angry left-wing base blames for most of America's (and the world's) problems today. One speech attendee reportedly said Clinton "sounded more like a Goldman Sachs managing director" than a politician. Releasing that transcript "would bury her against Sanders," the individual added. "It really makes her look like an ally of the firm."