
Claiming MAID for disabled is 'coercive' and 'eugenicist' gives opponents ammunition to end the program



A disabled person desiring MAID is not the problem. It's the lack of supports while that person is alive



[Peter Thurley](#) · for CBC Opinion · Posted: Feb 20, 2023 3:00 AM CST | Last Updated: February 20



Joan Williams holds on to her son Aaron's arm shortly before receiving medical assistance in dying after a long battle with a neurologic condition in Vancouver in Sept. 2020. It's possible to support a wide application of MAID while also wanting disabled people to have access to safe, reliable, affordable housing, and adequate financial and social supports that allow them to thrive in their communities, writes Peter Thurley. (Ben Nelms/CBC)

This column is an opinion by Peter Thurley, a writer based in Kitchener, Ont. For more information about [CBC's Opinion section](#), please see the [FAQ](#).

Stories of disabled people being "forced" to pursue Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID) dominated Canadian news in 2022.

Disability activists, primarily on Twitter, but elsewhere as well, have picked up the thread and taken it further, suggesting that current government policies around MAID — which were mandated by a [Supreme Court of Canada](#) ruling — are explicitly [coercive](#) and [eugenicist](#) in nature. These activists argue that the Canadian government actively uses MAID to encourage disabled people to die, thereby removing said individuals from requiring government support in the first place.

As a disabled person, I have some skin in this game.

- **People with disabilities need more federal supports to deter requests for assisted dying, committee says**

In April of 2015, a 25-pound tumour the size of a large watermelon folded my kidney in half and ruptured my bowels. While the emergency surgery to remove the tumour was successful, I am left with severe chronic abdominal pain, often spending 18 hours per day in bed.

The constant pain, which feels like being repeatedly hit in the abdomen with a hammer, combined with severe PTSD and sensory sensitivities, has left me permanently disabled and unable to work.

I remain forever grateful to the hundreds of medical staff who worked together to save my life, but given concerns with my future quality of life, I have to consider the real possibility that my life may end via MAID. So, when disability activists take to Twitter and other venues to claim that MAID is a state-sponsored attempt at eugenics, I become concerned.

Activists are making a serious mistake by focusing on MAID as coercive and eugenicist. Not only does it mistakenly place MAID as the crux of the problem, not the appalling lack of social support for disabled people, it also provides conservative opponents with ammunition to dismantle the program altogether in the future.

Barriers to programs prohibitively high

It is genuinely possible to support a wide application of MAID, a right [won for Canadians by disability activists](#) throughout the 20th century, while also wanting disabled people to have access to safe, reliable, affordable housing, adequate financial and social supports that allow them to thrive in their communities, and extra supports to help them navigate a complex and often hostile health care system.

Barriers to basic provincial social service programs are prohibitively high. In Ontario, [about half](#) of all initial applications for the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) are rejected out of hand, forcing people with disabilities to go through the appeals process. In 2019, the Sudbury Community Legal Aid clinic estimated that they spend 60 per cent of their time doing ODSP appeals, finding success in about 80 per cent of cases. This cost Ontario taxpayers more than \$21 million, which could have been invested in social supports instead.

And, in Saskatchewan, housing is simply [out of reach](#) for most disabled people due to the inadequacy of social assistance rates compared to market rents, leading people to couch surf with friends before eventually finding themselves on the street.

According to a [2016 study](#) by Statistics Canada, adult Canadians who report having a disability are more than twice as likely as non-disabled Canadians to be forced to temporarily live with family, friends, in their car, or somewhere else because they had nowhere to live — a situation referred to as "hidden" homelessness."

The fact that a disabled person desires MAID is not the problem. The problem is that they don't have the appropriate supports to live a good life while they are alive.

Attacks on MAID are co-opted

In publicly attacking Medical Assistance in Dying, disability activists only hurt other disabled people who don't have many, if any, options left. Every attack on MAID from the disability community is an attack co-opted as speaking points at the next Conservative fundraising barbecue. In December, federal

Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre used the most common of all conservative talking points, [suggesting that](#) MAID was a "slippery slope" toward instructing people with disabilities to "give up on life altogether."

Every time [a disability advocate says](#), "People with disabilities are choosing to die with dignity rather than live without it," conservatives [ready their policy knives](#). Over the past few months, no fewer than five [major features](#) were [published](#) in conservative and mainstream newspapers and magazines around the world, including the [New York Times](#) and the [Wall Street Journal](#).

In their pursuit of justice for people with disabilities, activists should be asking why the debate over Medical Assistance in Dying is being framed as "either/or" rather than "both/and." In other words, the question is not "MAID or Housing," nor is it "MAID or Canada Disability Benefit." Rather, it is something more nuanced, something that can help people with disabilities live *and* die with dignity and comfort.

Don't punish other disabled people by taking away their choices instead of helping them thrive. Don't settle for MAID as a victim in this fight. Future disabled people will thank you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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