



**The Arc**

*For people with intellectual  
and developmental disabilities*



American Association  
on Intellectual and  
Developmental Disabilities

# Position Statement Physician-Assisted Suicide

The Arc strongly opposes physician-assisted suicide for people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities<sup>1</sup>. Laws and procedures, however strict, are not sufficient to protect them from being coerced into ending their lives

## Issue

As the nation and individual states consider the adoption of physician-assisted suicide<sup>2</sup> policies, it is essential that The Arc take a strong position on this issue to protect the rights and interests of people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities<sup>3</sup>. Because historical ignorance, prejudice and discrimination against people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities continue, The Arc must educate society.

Major problems that exist are:

- Despite well-intended laws designed to protect our constituency, the nature of their condition continues to leave them at risk;
- The current system of health services, particularly managed care, provides economic incentives for rationing health care, which could lead to the encouragement of physician-assisted suicide;
- Society often incorrectly perceives that our constituency, by definition, has a poor quality of life;
- Public perception on this issue is sometimes confused with specific issues related to advance directives<sup>4</sup> and death with dignity; and.
- Individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities may be unduly influenced by authority figures such as doctors, health care workers, social workers, family, guardian/conservators and friends. This can result in a lack of true informed consent.

## Position

The Arc strongly opposes physician-assisted suicide for our constituency. This is based on its beliefs that:

- Laws and procedures, however strict, are not sufficient to protect our constituents from being coerced into ending their lives.

The Arc

1660 L Street, NW  
Suite 301

Washington, D. C. 20036

Phone: 202.534.3700

Toll free: 800.433.5255

Fax: 202.534.3731

[www.thearc.org](http://www.thearc.org)

- When the person is seriously ill and in pain, the use of appropriate medical or palliative care to reduce and/or eliminate pain can and must be provided;
- Advance directives for our constituency are appropriate whenever informed consent is assured and should be honored; and
- The death of any person with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities by way of physician-assisted suicide is unacceptable.

<sup>1</sup>“People with intellectual disabilities and/or developmental disabilities” refers to those defined by the AAIDD classification and DSM IV. In everyday language they are frequently referred to as people with cognitive, intellectual and/or developmental disabilities although the professional and legal definitions of those terms both include others and exclude some defined by DSM IV.

<sup>2</sup>Physician-assisted suicide: Occurs when a physician provides a

medical means for death, usually a prescription for a lethal amount of medication that the patient takes on his or her own. (In euthanasia, the physician directly and intentionally administers a substance to cause death.) (Ethics Manual, American College of Physicians, 1998.)

<sup>3</sup>See note 1.

<sup>4</sup>Advance directive: An individual’s written or oral preferences regarding life-sustaining medical treatment decisions. (Ethics Manual, American College of Physicians, 1998.)

**Adopted:  
Board of Director, The Arc  
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**Board of Directors, AAIDD  
August 18, 2008**

**Congress of Delegates, The  
Arc of the United States  
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*Achieve with us.*