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Billboard stirs controversy

Final Exit Network seeks to raise awareness of 'end-of-life' issues

By JEN WULF STAFF WRITER

Final Exit Network receives about six applications for suicide guidance, or “exits,” every month. They provide suicide information for terminally and irreversibly ill patients and have 3,000 members nationwide — about 300 of them in Florida.

Early last month the group posted a billboard on northbound Interstate 75 near the Sumter Boulevard exit and, on Thursday, filed a federal suit for free speech rights in Georgia.

The billboard, which reads, “**Irreversible illness? Unbearable suffering? Die with dignity,**” was posted by the group to raise awareness of end-of-life issues, said president Jerry Dincin of Chicago, Ill.

“Florida is a state with a larger than usual population of people over 65 who are most apt to suffer from these debilitating disabilities,” Dincin said.

He said the group received more donations and inquiries after the sign was posted, but declined to quantify the response.

The billboard also prompted a response from the Diocese of Venice, which said the billboard may mislead vulnerable patients.

“The fear of a prolonged death and concerns about being a burden tempts some to take control of death and bring it about before its time, but this is a false mercy,” according to a statement from the diocese.

David Glaser, a spokesperson for Tidewell Hospice, said he worried FEN clients could be ill-informed about hospice. He said Tidewell provides services and family counseling regardless of whether the client can pay, and he said they are “expert” at pain management.

“We always feel like there’s another option that can improve quality of life,” Glaser said.

While Dincin said FEN did not encourage suicide, he said patients should have “at least the option of hastening your own end.”

“We’re eager to make this a civil rights issue,” Dincin said. “And in order to do that people need to know what we’re fighting for, so we’re trying to do a public information campaign,” Dincin said.

The group's federal lawsuit challenges Georgia's assisted suicide laws that FEN members say are too broad and curtail their First Amendment right of free speech.

"We believe that there is the right of the individual to die and that right will become the ultimate human right of the 21st century," said spokesperson Frank Kavanaugh.

The suit was inspired by the arrest of four FEN members in Georgia, including FEN's founder, Ted Goodwin of Punta Gorda.

The four were arrested on charges of assisting in a suicide, tampering with evidence and operating a racketeering and criminal enterprise in connection with the 2008 suicide of a Georgia man.

Goodwin, in a telephone interview from Georgia, said that FEN did not physically assist in the suicide. Kavanaugh said the group instead offers counseling and information to people with irreversible or fatal illnesses, after they have been approved by a panel of retired physicians.

For clients accepted and found to be mentally competent, FEN typically recommends suicide using a hood and helium inhalation. For many cases, an FEN member will remove the equipment, so that family members believe the client died a natural death, Dincin said.

Goodwin said that the FEN would not encourage anyone to take their own life, but would rather offer support when asked. The federal suit would give FEN members security in spreading information about suicide in situations where someone is suffering from a terminal or irreversible illness.

"We want them to accept our right to control our destiny when we are suffering more than we can bear," Goodwin said.

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