

Disabled Ontario woman pursues medically assisted death after being denied access to suitable housing

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A 31-year-old disabled woman in Toronto is nearing final approval for medical assistance in dying (MAID) after her efforts to secure suitable housing were denied. The chronically ill woman, who uses a wheelchair due to a spinal cord injury, has been diagnosed with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (MCS), which triggers rashes, difficulty breathing, and blinding headaches. Called hemiplegic migraines, the latter cause her temporary paralysis.

The chemicals that make her sick are cigarette smoke, air fresheners, and laundry chemicals. Because she is at risk of anaphylactic shock, a life-threatening allergic attack, she must carry EpiPens at all times.

In what would be better described as state-sponsored murder, the woman, identified in media reports by the pseudonym Denise, is seeking a medically assisted death because she cannot find an affordable apartment that does not aggravate her illness. Research has shown that people with MCS often improve in chemically cleaner environments.

Denise has been driven to despair by a lack of suitable housing, with wheelchair access and cleaner air, that is the product of decades of austerity budgets for housing and social services enforced by all the establishment political parties.

Her only income is from the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), which provides a measly \$1,169 a month plus \$50 for a special diet, in a city where the average one-bedroom apartment rent is more than \$2,000 and the vacancy rate is only 3 percent.

With the help of supporters, Denise contacted 10 different agencies in Toronto over a six-month period to help her find affordable housing with reduced smoke and chemical exposure. “None of them were able to do anything meaningful in terms of getting me relocated, getting the discretionary emergency, or temporary housing and emergency funds,” she told CTV. “I’ve applied for MAID essentially ... because of abject poverty.”

Perversely getting approval for her medically assisted death is proving far easier for Denise than securing appropriate housing. First, she had to be deemed competent to make the decision by a psychiatrist. Then her medical history was reviewed and approved by one MAID provider. A second provider is now set

to approve her final documents, including a power of attorney, funeral arrangements, and a DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) order.

Hoping for an earlier death, Denise has asked doctors to waive the 90-day waiting period for people like her who are “Track Two” cases, meaning their natural death isn’t imminent. Revised federal MAID legislation that came into effect March 17, 2021 expanded who could ask for assisted death. “Track One” patients are typically those with terminal cancer or other fatal diseases.

One of Denise’s physicians, Dr. Riina Bray, medical director of the Environmental Health Clinic at Women’s College Hospital in Toronto, said Denise requires “immediate relocation for her safety.”

Bray was shocked that none of the doctors involved in the MAID application contacted her to learn about the efforts to help Denise find housing first. “They’re easily fixable situations,” said Bray.

Denise’s symptoms lessen greatly when friends and supporters can raise sufficient funds for her to stay at a wheelchair-accessible hotel located near a ravine with clean air. “Stays are paid for with donations and are limited in length by how much funds are available,” she explained. “It is an emergency ‘solution’ and absolutely not sustainable.”

Denise once had a much better life, working as a professional make-up artist making a good wage. But her work triggered her MCS, which is a recognized disability under the Canadian Human Rights Act. Once exposed, low levels of chemicals found in everyday materials, such as soaps, detergents, cosmetics, and newspaper inks, can trigger severe physical symptoms in people with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities.

Denise’s act of desperation is far from unique. A 51-year-old Ontario woman, identified as “Sophia” by CTV, chose medically assisted death in February after her anguished search for affordable housing free of cigarette smoke and chemical cleaners failed.

“The government sees me as expendable trash, a complainer, useless and a pain in the a**,” Sophia said in a video filmed on February 14, eight days before her death, and shared by one of her friends.

Sophia left behind letters documenting a two-year search for help, in which she begged local, provincial and federal officials for assistance in finding a home away from the smoke and chemicals drifting through her apartment.

“This person begged for help for years, two years, wrote everywhere, called everywhere, asking for healthy housing,” said Rohini Peris, President of the Environmental Health Association of Québec (ASEQ-EHAQ). The Quebec group has been assisting Ontario patients with MCS after a similar Ontario organization shut down years ago due to a lack of funding. “It’s not that she didn’t want to live. She couldn’t live that way,” Peris said.

Dr. Lynn Marshall, an environmental physician, Dr. Chantal Perrot, a family physician and MAID provider, Dr. Justine Dembo, a psychiatrist, and Dr. James Whyte, a family doctor and psychotherapist also wrote to federal housing and disability government officials on Sophia’s behalf. They stated that her condition improved in cleaner air environments and asked for help to find a chemical-free residence. “We physicians,” they wrote, “find it UNCONSCIONABLE that no other solution is proposed to this situation other than medical assistance in dying.”

Dr. Bray said, “It was an easy fix, she just needed to be helped to find a suitable place to live, where there wasn’t smoke wafting and through the vents... If people have to go and kill themselves, that would be a very pathetic thing and it will be heard by the rest of the world because it’s not acceptable.”

Another physician who provides assisted death, Dr. Scott Anderson, an ICU physician in London, Ont., said he is seeing more patients with chronic conditions asking for assisted death because they cannot get the services they need to live free of torment.

The growth of medically assisted death among people who could still enjoy long periods of fulfilling life is a devastating indictment of the capitalist profit system. Driven to despair by the gutting of public housing and social services—in which every Ontario government from Bob Rae’s New Democrats to Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne’s Liberals, and Mike Harris and Doug Ford’s Progressive Conservatives has participated over the past thirty years—these people find it much easier to obtain state approval to die than the amenities for a dignified existence.

The increase in MAID cases makes a mockery of claims by its supporters that the expansion of the legislation to include “Track 2” cases was a “progressive” reform because it strengthened “personal medical choice.” There can be no talk of “free choice” when the most basic necessities of daily life are denied by a social order that prioritizes private profit over the protection of human life. The fact that no agency at any level of government has intervened to forestall these desperate acts proves that they are content to turn a blind eye, if not openly supportive of people whom they view, to use Sophia’s words, as “expendable trash” ending their lives.

It is no coincidence that the expansion of medically assisted death to “Track 2” cases took place amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The same indifference to the protection of human life exhibited in the MAID debate has been on full display by governments at all levels since the emergence of COVID-19. As a result of the refusal of federal and provincial governments to take the necessary steps to suppress transmission and save lives, almost 40,000 Canadians have officially succumbed to a virus whose propagation was entirely preventable.

Anyone claiming that there is “no money” to prevent people suffering from chronic but not lethal illnesses choosing MAID or the waves of mass COVID-19 deaths is simply closing their eyes to social reality. Toronto spent almost \$2 million and months of planning to forcibly remove homeless people from encampments in public parks in the summer of 2021. The federal Liberal government handed over more than \$650 billion to Canada’s big banks and corporations virtually overnight at the beginning of the pandemic. Trudeau, supported by the NDP and Conservatives, is now funneling billions of dollars to Ukraine and the Canadian military to provide weaponry for waging war on Russia and future predatory conflicts. For months, Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Ontario Conservative Premier Doug Ford have been touring the highly profitable automobile manufacturers in Ontario to announce the handout of billions of dollars in public money to subsidize the profits of Ford, GM, and Stellantis. And Canada’s 48 billionaires saw their personal wealth climb by \$78 billion during the first year of the pandemic.

The wasting of society’s vast resources by a criminal ruling elite while ever-greater numbers of working people suffer deepening social misery, driving some to take the most drastic measures, demonstrates that they have lost any right to govern. It falls to the working class, mobilized on the basis of a socialist program, to take political power into its own hands, expropriate the exploiters, and deploy the immense financial and technical resources produced by the labour of working people to secure a decent and dignified living for all.



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