

B.C. appeal court will hear case of hospice resisting assisted suicide

The B.C. Court of Appeal has agreed to hear the case of the Delta Hospice Society, which is trying to keep assisted suicide out of its Irene Thomas Hospice.

A lower court had ruled in June that the society did not act in good faith when it launched a mail-in vote proposing changes to its constitution, or when it accepted some membership applications and denied others without explanation.

But the society, which runs a small 10-bed hospice in Delta, responded by appealing that decision. In a press release Aug. 17, it said the society has been “mistakenly” treated as a public institution, not a private one.

Board president Angelina Ireland said private associations in Canada are free to choose members who support their values.

“We feel like the court heard us today,” she said after the appeal court agreed to hear the case.

Ireland believes a large influx of membership applications, 310 of which were denied, were part of a coordinated “hostile takeover” by members of the public who would like to see assisted suicide, or medical aid in dying (MAID), offered at the hospice.

The society’s proposed vote and constitutional changes were designed to formally recognize the society as one that operated on Christian principles and supported life until “natural death,” values it has implicitly held since it was founded in 1991, said Ireland.

The B.C. Supreme Court ruling in June that the society must accept all 310 memberships that were denied “gave *carte blanche* to organized groups to perform hostile takeovers of private societies that hold minority views,” Ireland said.

“It would mean thousands of societies can now be taken over by any organized group of a few hundred people. That is not how a free society is supposed to work.”

The hospice does not currently allow MAID on site; patients who request it are referred to other facilities. Faith-based organizations are exempt from a Fraser Health Authority mandate to offer MAID in palliative care settings.

Christopher Pettypiece, Sharon Farrish, and Jim Levin had petitioned the B.C. Supreme Court to block the vote and meeting.

In a statement, Pettypiece said, "We believe Delta Hospice and its services should be available to all that require hospice care, regardless of their end-of-life choices. We are committed to ensuring a membership that reflects the wishes of the entire community and we'll use this delay to strengthen our representation of them as we head into the fall and the B.C. Court's decision."

No date has been set for the hearing.