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Idahoans push for hearing on changes to conscience law

BOISE — An organization that represents Idaho retirees voiced Thursday a strong need to pass legislation that would fix the “conscience law.”

The message from AARP Idaho, which has 180,000 members, came at a press conference at the State Capitol with four legislators, including Rep. Leon Smith, R-Twin Falls. Smith has introduced a bill to amend the law so that a patient’s end-of-life instructions aren’t ignored, while keeping the rest of it intact.

Smith’s legislation has hit a snag.

The conscience law, passed in 2010, gave health care professionals the right to opt out of providing any care they object to based on religious, moral or ethical principles. Smith’s bill adds language to the conscience law that says no health care professional can refuse to follow a patient’s or physician’s directions that conform with the “Medical Consent and Natural Death Act,” an existing state law that regulates the medical profession’s role in end-of-life care.

After his bill was introduced in the House Judiciary and Rules Committee, it was moved to the House State Affairs Committee. From there, it’s been stuck. The committee’s chairman, Rep. Tom Loertscher, R-Iona, hasn’t given it a hearing. “He would never give me an explanation for why it’s going to stay there,” Smith said in the press conference, adding that he’s heard from more than 100 constituents concerned about the strength of their living wills.

Two other bills, sponsored by Rep. Phylis King, D-Boise, and Rep. Tom Trail, R-Moscow, also focus on the same issue and haven’t moved forward.

AARP Idaho representatives had about 500 letters from members stacked up at the press conference. They were promptly delivered to Loertscher’s office.

Peggy Munson, AARP state volunteer president, said the existing conscience law doesn’t protect individual rights of those making end-of-life decisions, and it needs to be amended.

“They don’t want any state law messing with their legal rights and this law does just that,” she said. “This is a case of government overreach and it’s just plain wrong.”

In an interview, Loertscher said he thinks the language in the proposed legislation does damage to the conscience law. He said he’ll go through the letters, and look for any that are from his constituents.

“I’m not ignoring the issue,” he said, adding that a couple of other ideas in the works may emerge concerning the conscience law.