Good afternoon, my name is Françoise Willems-Shirley. Thank you for your service and this opportunity. Today, I would like share my mom's story with you In the hopes of bringing a broader understanding to why and how important the passing of this bill is.

My mom's name was Tonny Willems and she passed away from cancer in March of 2022.

My mom was kindness personified, she was the rare person who took the time to really see and hear everyone who crossed her path. Yet, sadly, when it came to her own life, she often felt unheard, unseen and felt like she had very little choice in many aspects of her life.

She advocated all of her adult life for the ability to die peacefully, when that time came. I recall numerous times being at a doctor's appointment with her and she would bring up medical aid in dying with her doctor again and again. "You know what I would want", she would say to her doctor, "I want to die on my own terms, I don't want to suffer in pain when we know death is inevitable" to which her doctor replied, "yes, Tonny, I know that is what you would want but you know we can't do that here". My mom felt so strongly about this that she even hand wrote it into her health directive even though she knew it was likely not going to be a choice for her, but she held out hope that it would be.

My mom had been struggling for over 20 years, widowed suddenly at age 63, heart problems and procedures, a debilitating autoimmune disease and, ultimately, cancer.

In February of 2022, we found our mom on the floor of her apartment. Within a day we found out she had cancer and it had spread everywhere, with no chance of survival. Hospice care was advised for her and we were told that she had days to weeks to live. At that point, had it been available, my mom would have chosen medical aid in dying.  The end was near and all that was left was more pain and suffering.

Many of us, who have not been through this, imagine hospice to be a peaceful time where we say our goodbyes to loved ones, reflect on our life and our memories until we quietly slip away holding the hands of those we cherish. Sadly, this could not have been further from the truth for my mom. For her, and for my sister and me, my mom’s end-of-life journey turned out to be a time of tremendous suffering, pain, trauma, and sadness.

My mom chose to go to a hospice facility. Within a couple of days she struggled to talk, move, eat or drink. Her pain continued to increase and, despite the best efforts of the hospice team, she suffered. A few days into hospice, we were told that the signs were there that she was nearing the end. We thought, 'Thank God, her suffering is over." From there, it was another FOUR weeks before she actually passed away. Four weeks without food or water, four weeks of begging and pleading with medical staff to address my mom's suffering, four weeks of a living hell for her and for us all. After the first false alarm, we were told by the doctors that a body can't survive without water for longer than  3-5 days. That may be true for some, possibly even many, but I am here to tell you it was not true for my mom!

What we lived those weeks can only be described as inhumane. Situations such as eating your lunch while watching your mom literally decompose in front of you, her body convulsing while you take notes on the timing of those convulsions so you have proof that she is suffering and can advocate for more medication, became our normal. If only we could have been convinced that she was not aware, but sadly, we would see signs that she was still, at times, aware and suffering.

Witnessing and experiencing what we did left lifelong scars. We were not able to truly grieve, mourn, honor and remember my mom after she passed because the trauma of what we had lived haunted us and was all consuming.

Having a voice and a choice in how you live and in how you die should be a right for all Minnesotans. This is not about politics. It is about humanity, dignity and choice.