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My name is Michelle Hewitt and I live in Kelowna, BC. Thank you for inviting me to appear as a witness and thank you for your time on this committee.

I am a disabled woman with multiple sclerosis. At times my disease has been aggressive, and it is fairly advanced. I use a power wheelchair and have severe fatigue and pain. However, I have a great quality of life. Today I represent Disability Without Poverty. Roughly two in ten people living in Canada are disabled, but looking at just those who live in poverty, four in ten of them are disabled. Disabled people are overrepresented – there are twice as many disabled people living in poverty than statistics alone would account for. Often, they live in abject poverty, as disability assistance payments are usually as low as half or two thirds of the poverty line.

We know that disabled people have been granted medical assistance in dying (MAiD), because the intolerable suffering they face is caused by poverty – and there are conditions that they would consider acceptable to relieve that suffering. Below are just two examples from people living in British Columbia.

Sean had ALS and wanted to live at home. He managed to do so for a number of years. When the constant stress of finding the right care on his own became too much, his health authority offered to place him in long-term care, four hours away from his ten-year-old son.

Instead, Sean chose MaiD. He described the funding decisions and institutional offerings advanced by the local health authority as “a death sentence.”

Madeline has post-viral syndrome and has been living with it for 30 years. There are no Health Canada approved treatments, but she found a combination of treatments that works for her – and they all require her to pay out of pocket. However, she has exhausted all options financially, and is currently getting by month to month on GoFundMe campaigns. When the money runs out, Madeline says she will have no option but to use MaiD, which she has already qualified for. She says she has no wish to die, but she will be facing an unbearable wall of pain that has no quality of life.

No one in Canada should ever die because they live in poverty, and yet, for disabled people, we hasten that death. We provide a state sanctioned procedure for these disabled people to die. For Sean and Madeline, we have remedies to their suffering that would be acceptable to them.

Sean and Madeline have been vocal in the media about their needs and the remedies to their suffering. However, we have heard nothing in response to this from the government. Either the government believes that disability accommodations set out in law do not need to be upheld or it does not take its role to oversee the MAiD safeguards seriously – because Sean and Madeline’s suffering came from a social condition, not their medical condition.

I cannot believe that this was ever the intention of MAiD – that we sanction the deaths of disabled people because they live in poverty – and yet, we see it happening. I ask that you recognize that the safeguards are failing, and I ask that you support disabled lives. Support the Canada Disability Benefit bill and ensure that it lifts all disabled people out of poverty.

Implement wide reform to our care systems that give disabled people the care they want. Until these conditions are met, MAiD eligibility must be restricted to those who are approaching the end of their life, whose suffering is intolerable from their medical condition, not from the societal conditions they are forced to live under.

I finish with Madeline’s words:

“I’m trying really hard not to freak out. But that I’m facing death for something that can be managed is bloody ridiculous, and it makes me so angry. I die when I run out of money.”