

Montana starts online database for living wills

Helena (AP) – The state has launched an online database for living wills that will be accessible to doctors and hospitals 24 hours a day through a website or by telephone.

The Montana End of Life Registry was required in a bill passed by the 2005 Legislature. To participate, Montanans must write down their desires for life-prolonging medical care and have it signed by two witnesses, Attorney General Mike McGrath said Tuesday.

Montanans can download a form at the attorney general's website that contains all the information needed to meet legal requirements. Citizens mail the form to the attorney general's office where it is scanned into a secure web site. The original form is returned to its owner, although with a wallet card so doctors know a person is enrolled.

"We strongly encourage people to go through this process," McGrath said.

Talking about life-sustaining care in the case of an incapacitating injury is difficult, so a lot of people don't do it, said Judy Gustafson, coordinator of pain and palliative care services at St. Patrick Hospital in Missoula. But she said that leaves people to have such discussions in a moment of crisis.

She said the directory also solves the problem of living wills being at home or at an attorney's office. "We really make every effort to make sure, if there's a document in existence, that we're finding it," Gustafson said. "But it's hard on off-hours or weekends or if people are from out of town. In a time of crisis, families don't want to leave" to find the documents.