

Vote-rich Oakland key to petition drive

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

Kathryn Mogle doesn't have her petitions yet. But when she gets them, she plans an all-out individual effort to get the right to physician-assisted suicide on the 1998 state ballot.

"I'm only one person," said the Borkley resident. "But I plan to go up and down my neighborhood. I've never done anything like this before, but it's an important issue to me. I saw my mother wishing to die."

Dorothy Conrad, a Birmingham resident, said she too will circulate petitions as part of Merian's Friends, the Ann Arbor based group that on Tuesday officially kicked off its statewide petition drive.

"I firmly believe anybody with a clear mind ought to have the right to decide for himself or herself," said Conrad, a former Birmingham mayor.

Merian's Friends — with retired physician and former Michigan State Senator Edward C. Pierce as its chair — kicked off the long awaited petition drive with press conferences in Detroit and other cities.

None of the conferences were held in Oakland County, something Farmington Hills resident Jan Dolan said was an oversight, rather than a snub.

"We certainly wouldn't ignore Oakland County," said Dolan, a former state representative who

is a member of the executive committee of Merian's Friends — named in honor of Merian Frederick who died Oct. 22, 1993 in Royal Oak.

At that time Mrs. Frederick was the 19th person known to have taken her own life after consulting with Dr. Jack Kevorkian, who lived in Royal Oak at the time but has since moved to West Bloomfield.

Dolan said Merian's Friends is counting on strong support in voter-rich Oakland County to get the 250,000 signatures needed to qualify for the ballot.

Ed Sheldon, a Troy resident, expects that garnering that many legitimate signatures will not be easy. "I helped Dr. Kevorkian with his (unsuccessful) petition drive in 1994," he said.

"There's a lot of support at all age levels," Sheldon said. "Older people are perhaps closer to the issue, but young people are more aggressive about the right to die."

Sheldon said he supports the drive as a matter of individual freedom. "If somebody wants to die, I don't think it's any of the government's business."

Although assisted suicide is an issue closely linked with Kevorkian, Merian's Friends is not directly linked with the retired pathologist, according to Carol Poonisch, daughter of Merian Frederick and an officer

in the organization.

The separation is intentional, Poonisch said earlier this year as the organization was enmeshed in procedural matters, including

the precise wording of the ballot question.

Merian's Friends recognizes that Kevorkian brought the issue of assisted suicide into the

public spotlight, Poonisch said. But some members of the organization were not completely happy with the physician's tactics, she said.

The organization is not associated with Kevorkian in hopes of getting support from a wider portion of the electorate, Poonisch said.



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Initial response supports an assisted suicide ballot

Some people were a bit suspicious, but far more were supportive and enthusiastic, according to Judy Michaels, a clinical social worker who circulated petitions to legalize physician assisted suicide Tuesday at the Orchard Lake Mall in West Bloomfield.

"In a matter of two hours, I personally filled four petitions," said Michaels. "If I would have had more petitions, I could have filled them."

Michaels is a member of Merian's Friends, the organization that formally kicked off its petition drive on behalf of physician assisted suicide Tuesday.

The Ann Arbor based organization hopes to get 350,000 valid signatures — 100,000 more than the required minimum — to put

a referendum on physician assisted suicide on the 1998 ballot in Michigan.

Michaels also circulated petitions last week at the Art Fair in Ann Arbor, where she and other members of Merian's Friends garnered an estimated 4,100 signatures.

"The organization had a booth, but I went out into the parking lots," said Michaels. "I feel that strongly about the issue."

Michaels said she doesn't believe physician assisted suicide will ever be universally accepted or even the preferred option. "But I firmly believe that anybody who is terminally ill should have physician assisted suicide as a predictable option."

— By Pat Murphy

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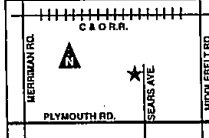
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