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'Equal parenting' petition OK'd

The petition for an "equal parental rights" initiated measure has been approved by North Dakota Secretary of State Al Jaeger, his office said Tuesday.

By: **Herald Staff Report**, Grand Forks Herald

The petition for an "equal parental rights" initiated measure has been approved by North Dakota Secretary of State Al Jaeger, his office said Tuesday.

Supporters, many hailing from Walsh County where a similar law passed in November, will have a year to gather the 13,452 signatures needed to put the measure on the ballot.

According to the language of the petition, the measure would amend state law to "create the presumption that each parent (in a divorce case) is a fit parent and entitled to be awarded equal parental rights and responsibilities by a court unless there is clear and convincing evidence to the contrary; the measure would also provide a definition of equal parenting time."

Jill Bjerke of Park River, N.D., the driving force behind the Walsh County law, is an organizer of the statewide petition. She said earlier that she's making the big push because of the legal controversy over the county law.

State Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem said in February that the county law usurps state authority in divorce and custody cases.

Twenty-four other women are on the initiated measure's sponsoring committee with Bjerke as chairwoman.

A similar statewide measure failed in 2006. One of the people behind that effort is Bjerke's boyfriend, Mitch Sanderson.

The new measure may appear on the June 2014 ballot if petitioners turn in signatures before midnight March 12, Jaeger's office said. If they do so after but before the deadline, the measure would be on the November 2014 ballot.