

Daily Herald

Big Picture - Local Focus

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Needed: organ donors to save lives

Everyone knows that the number of people waiting for organ transplants far exceeds the number of organs available.

What many Illinois residents might not know is that a sizable gap also exists between the number of people in the state who want to be organ donors and those who can be assured that their intentions will be honored.

This is due, in large part, to a relatively recent change in Illinois law.

The state once operated its organ donor program under what is called "donor intent" guidelines. That meant that any adult could, with a witness, sign a statement of intent on the back of his or her driver's license. But under this system, relatives could, at the time of the person's death, intervene and prevent organ donation if they either had doubts about their loved one's actual commitment or if they personally opposed the idea of donating organs.

Since Jan. 1, 2006, Illinois has operated a "donor consent" registry. This means that an organ donor's wishes cannot be altered by relatives, well-meaning or otherwise, at the time of death. Once a resident

Our View

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This was a constructive change, one the Daily Herald fully supported at the time.

The catch is that anyone who registered to be an organ donor before Jan. 1, 2006, must now do so again to be covered under the new law — a fact not widely known or understood.

Fortunately, registering could hardly be easier. Just go to the Web site www.IamAreYou.org or Secretary of State Jesse White's Web site at www.cyberdriveillinois.com/.

Click on the link to register.

The registration field asks only for driver's license number, name, address, phone number and e-mail address. That's it. The database, managed by the

secretary of state's office, is confidential.

A coalition of agencies responsible for organ donation and called Donate Life Illinois has set a goal of registering 3.5 million Illinoisans in the next year and a half.

That's an ambitious but worthy goal. Donate Life Illinois reports that 94,000 people nationwide are awaiting transplants. In Illinois, the number is 4,700. Many readers will recall that Secretary of State Jesse White last year launched a series of television spots featuring people actually awaiting transplants. Since, at least one individual featured in those ads has died while waiting for a kidney.

Donate Life Illinois conducted a statewide survey in which 90 percent of respondents agreed that signing up for organ donation was "the right thing to do" but only 40 percent had actually signed up.

The only requirement is that a prospective donor be at least 18. For those who think that older age or various ailments might make their organs unusable, those are medical decisions that are made at the time of death.

The stakes are plain: Time lost in registering more donors translates, directly, to lives lost.