

CHICAGO DEFENDER

Local

Saving a life was never this easy

by DEANNA HARTLEY, Mediill News Service
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Secretary of State Jesse White is scheduled to throw out the first pitch Thursday at the White Sox game. He also will pitch one of his favorite causes--getting Illinoisans to sign up as organ donors.

As part of Organ Donor Day at the ballpark, a promotional ad will feature actual recipients and donor families in Illinois.

More than 4,700 Illinois residents are awaiting lifesaving organ transplants, according to Donate Life Illinois. And their plight has been compounded by the fact that 20 percent of donor organs have been lost due to conflicting wishes of family members. In an effort to avoid such losses, Illinois passed a First-Person Consent Law more than a year ago which makes a donor's decision final. "Personally I feel that any decision I make is my decision," said Kim McCullough, spokeswoman for Gift of Hope, an organ and tissue donor network in Illinois.

More than 40 states have this legislation in place and McCullough thinks it was a long time coming to this state. "People don't want to put their families in the position of making that decision," she said.

Illinois currently has a split system with 6 million people in an old organ donor registry and 2 million in a new registry. The problem is that the old registry still allows donor families to dispute final decisions. David Druker, the Secretary of State's press secretary, said the new registrations are preferable because the process becomes a contract between the individual and the state. Druker said that families of deceased are grieving and busy with funeral arrangements. "[This decision] is the last thing on their minds and it's very unpleasant to deal with it," he said. McCullough said the challenge is to help people understand that they have to re-register under the new registry to ensure that their decision is final. "Illinois makes it easier than any other state for people to sign up to donate organs," McCullough said. "People can sign up online, at the Department of Motor Vehicles, at donor registration events and by phone."

But some people object to organ donation for personal reasons. "Sometimes they're afraid of what's going to happen," McCullough said. Some fear that their bodies will be disfigured or that their families will be informed of gruesome details. Another reason people may be hesitant to donate is because they are unaware of their religion's stance on this issue.

"Every major religion supports [organ donation] as the highest human act of compassion and giving," McCullough said.