

Join the organ donor list

Nationally blacks make up 37 percent of the people on transplant lists but comprise just 10 percent of donors

Dawn Turner Trice
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Paul Hutchins is a house of a man. He's 6 foot 5, 340 pounds and wears a size 15 shoe. In the mid-1990s, he played offensive tackle for the [Green Bay Packers](#).

Back then he could never have imagined that a few years after leaving the game, he'd be bowled over by renal failure. Or, that he would spend years praying for a donor and that person would come in the form of a 3-year-old boy whose kidneys were so tiny that two of the child's organs function as one for Hutchins.

"Part of it felt mercenary -- profiting from someone else's demise," said Hutchins, 39, a native Chicagoan who still lives here. "But I'd like to take the gift that this 3-year-old child gave me and tell other people who are waiting for a transplant that it can happen for them, but others need to be willing to give the gift of life."

On Sunday, Hutchins participated in a telethon hosted by the non-profit Gift of Hope Organ & Tissue Donor Network and Salem Baptist Church's organ donor ministry. It was part of Gift of Hope's campaign this month -- National Donate Life Month -- to encourage thousands to become organ donors.



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Indeed, the "gift of life" is a familiar refrain. But it can't be overemphasized or ignored at a time when nearly 5,000 people in Illinois and northwest Indiana, and about 103,000 around the country are waiting for a transplant on the national organ donation list, according to [Jack Lynch](#), director of community affairs for Gift of Hope.

Among blacks, those numbers are even more striking.

A [Rush University Medical Center](#) heart- and kidney-transplant social worker, for example, told me that an astounding 50 percent of the heart-transplant patients treated at Rush are African-American. Nationally blacks make up 37 percent of the people on transplant lists but comprise just 10 percent of donors, Lynch said.

Since his transplant surgery five weeks ago, Hutchins, who is African-American, has been out and about trying to nudge more blacks onto the donor rolls.

He said he wanted to let people see how well he's doing so soon after surgery.

He realizes that some folk have misconceptions and misgivings and need some convincing.

"There are myths like if you go to the emergency room, the physicians won't save your life because they want your organs," said Hutchins. "But the truth is that when organs are recovered, it's not done in the emergency room."

And it's illegal for organs to be donated without consent.

It's also important to know that it's illegal to buy or sell organs and tissue in this country. The goal is to dispel as many myths as possible to help more people understand that by becoming a donor we all can help improve the quality of life of those in need.

Before his transplant, Hutchins, a father of a 14-year-old son, went from dialysis three days a week for five hours a day to an 8-hour nightly regimen.

"I had an epiphany on the way to get my kidneys," he said. "I realized that if you survive, you have so much support that the moment doesn't just belong to you, but to everybody who helped you survive the journey."

Hutchins said he's looking forward to the day when transplant recipients can receive organs based upon their own DNA and generated by stem cell usage. Transplant donation is not a cure, but it's what we have right now.

To add your name to the Illinois Organ/Tissue Donor Registry, a database managed by the office of Illinois Secretary of State [Jesse White](#), you can go to giftofhope.org or donatelifeillinois.org.