

Are you an organ donor?

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By David Schwab, The Star

The need for organ and tissue donations is growing in Illinois.

At the same time, scores of prospective donors -- even many who think they are properly registered -- aren't aware the process for becoming a donor has changed.

The change occurred in 2006.

Before then, in order for a person to be eligible to donate, it took a driver's license signature and familial consent after death.

Now, people can decide if they will be prospective donors by signing up for the program online, via phone, or in person at the department of motor vehicles or various outreach events. Family members do not have to consent to the decision.

The reason for changing the system, officials said, was that 20 percent of families were overturning the decision to be a donor, often because of the emotions involved during and after a loved one's death.

Meanwhile, longer lives and medical breakthroughs means more people are good candidates for donations, making the campaign to get people registered or reregistered all the more urgent.

"We've seen a steady increase (in people waiting for organs or tissue) since the middle of last year," said Kim McCullough, spokesperson for the Gift of Hope Organ & Tissue Donor Network, a non-profit group that coordinates donations for most of Illinois and parts of Indiana.

April is National Donate Life Month. Whether you need to update your registration, or want to register for the first time, officials said now is the perfect time to do so.

"There's still close to four million (donors) who need to reregister in Illinois," said Scott Meis, campaign manager for the advocacy group Donate Life Illinois.

McCullough said the new registration system has received a favorable reception from the public.

Lots of families are glad to not have to face the tough decision about organ and tissue donation when a loved one dies.

Still, McCullough said, she hears lots of questions -- and lots of misconceptions -- about the program.

One question she hears frequently, she said, is from people wondering if their health or age prohibits them from donating. Many people who want to donate think that if they have an illness, or have been turned away from donating blood, for example, they can't donate organs.

The reality is, McCullough said, the eligibility to donate organs and tissues is complex.

Having medical conditions or being of a certain age doesn't necessarily impede your ability to donate. If you want to be a donor, she said, it's best to register and let medical personnel determine eligibility after death.

Another concern she hears frequently regards the process of removing organs, and what that does to the body of the deceased.

In fact, the process is respectful to the body and doesn't cause any noticeable disfigurement, she said.

When you die, "no one will be able to tell you're an organ or tissue donor -- and the result is that you've helped save lives," McCullough said.

To register or find out more information, interested people may go to www.iamareyou.org, www.lifegoeson.com or phone (888) 307-3668.

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