

Wendy Riemann: Have you told loved ones your organ donation preferences?

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My first job after college was working for Tommy Thompson when he was Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. His passion regarding organ donation registration was inspiring enough that I ended up writing my master's thesis on the issue of becoming an organ donor, and today I share a plea.

Throughout April we recognize National Donate Life month. It is a perfect time to register to become an organ donor and share that decision with loved ones.

Despite [a 2012 Gallup survey](#) finding that 95 percent of Americans support organ donation, and a broad range of religions, such as Catholicism, Lutheran, Islam, Judaism, Mormon, and Evangelicals, consider donating an act of charity, only 54 percent of the population is registered as organ donors. Even fewer of those individuals registered have shared information about their decision to donate with family members, the people who will most likely need to authorize that decision at the hospital should a donation situation occur.

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"If a person signs the donor card or goes to the registry, it is consent, but it is very important to have that conversation with loved ones so that they understand that decision and are comfortable carrying out those wishes, because that's what the family will be asked to authorize," Joel Newman, assistant director of communications for UNOS, said. "Regardless of what they feel about organ and

tissue donation, family will feel much more comfortable knowing what the wishes were and in fulfilling those wishes for their loved one.”

8,509 transplants have already been performed this year according to the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network](#). However, the demand for donated organs to preserve the lives and well-being of others is far greater.

As of April 1, the start of National Donate Life month, there were 114,964 men, women, and children on the [transplant request list](#). Every ten minutes a new person is added to the list – including grandchildren, spouses, neighbors, friends, veterans, and parents.

Before the day is over, 20 individuals on the transplant list will take their last breath, waiting for an organ donation.

Even though one organ donor has the power to save up to eight lives, only about three in every 1,000 people, die in a way that allows for organ donation.

“That’s why we need as many people to sign-up as we can,” Newman said. “Because of the medical criteria and circumstances, not everyone can be an organ donor — that is why it is so important for anyone who wishes to be a donor to sign-up and make their wishes known.”

Americans can be a part of the solution, even if we may not be able to heal a heart, cure a disease attacking the body, or fix a malfunctioning organ. First, we can register as an organ donor, and then we can immediately express those wishes to loved ones, to ensure those wishes are granted if a situation arises later.

Donating a loved one’s organs does not cost a grieving family extra money and transplant teams are entirely separate from medical teams. Every effort is always made to save a person’s life. Only if a person cannot be saved are organs matched to patients based on factors, such as medical need, time on the waiting list, and geographical location.

Take two minutes to learn more about being an organ donor and [register in your state’s database today](#) – then share that news with loved ones. If already registered, make it a goal to discuss organ donation in a conversation with family this week. Ask if they, too, are registered or have any preferences – it may save a

life and is a true gift of heart.

— *Riemann is president of 1492 Communications, a consulting firm. Like 1492 Communications on Facebook to learn more.*