



There are currently [more than 113,000 people](#) on the transplant waiting list across the United States, even though the donation and transplantation community works hard every day to save and improve lives. Education can help narrow the gap between available organs and those in need of a life-saving or life-altering transplant by increasing the number of registered donors and breaking down common misconceptions about the process and the organizations that facilitate them.

Here are some Frequently Asked Questions about Organ Procurement Organizations (OPOs) and the donation process:

What is the role of an OPO?

By law, OPOs are the only organizations that can facilitate the life-saving mission of recovering organs from deceased donors for transplantation. The [1984 National Organ Transplant Act](#) established and standardized the process of organ donation and recovery and ensured the fair and equitable allocation of donated organs. There are 58 OPOs in the U.S., each federally designated and regulated, representing a community of compassionate professionals dedicated to saving and improving lives.

Why are so many people on the transplant waiting list?

Organ donation is truly a rare event. Fewer than 1 percent of all people die in a way that allows for organ donation. Donors must meet extensive criteria, including: dying in a hospital and on a ventilator; passing a number of medical tests, such as being free of most cancers and organ damage; having their organs accepted by transplant teams and, most importantly, there must be authorization for donation.

How do Organ Procurement Organizations pursue possible donations?

On average, OPOs in the United States will screen more than 700,000 telephone death referrals from hospitals regarding the potential for organ donation every year. The OPOs send staff to the site to follow up on any referral that may have donor potential. They perform detailed medical record reviews of patient data, assess medical suitability and ensure potential organ donors are not missed.

How many organs are 'missed' or go unrecovered each year?

Due to the complex factors and time-sensitive nature of organ donation and transplantation, it is difficult to determine exactly how many potential donor organs are missed every year. However, recent media stories that claim more than 28,000 potential donations are missed are inaccurate. They are based on a report that itself states the metrics assume "full potential of the system, assuming 100 percent donation rates and 100 percent organ utilization." OPOs work diligently to increase the number of registered donors and improve the processes involved in transplantation, but 100 percent compliance is simply not feasible in a real-world setting. There are many clinical factors and transplant program preferences that limit organ donation.

Are efforts to increase the number of organ donors and organ transplants successful?

Organ donation has reached a new record for eight consecutive years in the United States. Based on data through the first nine months of this year, 2019 is on track to see a 9 percent increase in deceased organ donors over 2018. At that pace, the [Association of Organ Procurement Organizations \(AOPO\)](#) estimates an increase of 1,000 donors and 3,000 organs transplanted over last year.

Are opioid overdose deaths driving the increase in organ donors?

Drug intoxication deaths, which include opioid and others, have accounted for only about one-third of the growth in organ donations nationally since 2012. Since 2016, the number of drug intoxication donors has remained relatively flat, at about [12 percent of total donors](#) — a trend that is continuing in 2019. The increased use of organs from donors who have died from overdose illustrates that OPOs are successful in their responsibilities of actualizing potential donors. It also shows an important shift in perception among transplant professionals and the public about the acceptability of such organs.

Does organ, eye or tissue donation compromise death investigations?

It does not. In a 2014 position paper entitled “[Medical Examiner Release of Organs and Tissues for Transplantation](#),” the [National Association of Medical Examiners](#) concluded that, with proper communication and cooperation, medical examiners and coroners can allow for the procurement of at least some, if not all, organs and/or tissues and fulfill their legal mandates without detriment to death investigations.

Who regulates organ, eye and tissue donation in the U.S.?

Organ, eye and tissue donation is highly regulated in the United States. Federal agencies with oversight of organ or tissue donation include the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#) and its branches, the [Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services \(CMS\)](#), the [Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\)](#) and the [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#). Each state also has its own requirements for organizations that perform organ and tissue recovery, and OPOs must also follow [Organ Procurement & Transplant Network \(OPTN\)](#) policies and bylaws. There are industry-specific accreditation requirements, too.

How are OPOs working to improve the system?

The goal of every OPO is to reach the day when no one dies while on the transplant waiting list. This is a complex problem, and OPOs continually work with all stakeholders involved in donation and transplantation, including donor hospitals, transplant programs, insurance companies and government partners, along with medical and technological advancements to improve the process. Some of those efforts include:

- Improving hospital clinical support for organ donors and promoting the use of organ recovery centers
- Ensuring OPOs have access to donor hospital electronic medical records
- Continued support to educate communities to register to be a donor on the [Michigan Organ Donor Registry](#) or the [National Donate Life Donor Registry](#).

How many people can a single donor help?

A single deceased organ donor who dies in a way that allows for donation and meets the necessary criteria can save up to eight lives and improve the lives of many others through eye and tissue donation. The more people who are registered, the more likely it is that additional lives can be saved and improved.