



Organ donation can save 8 lives — UHC encourages West Virginians to sign up

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August 1, 2025

BRIDGEPORT, W.Va. (WV News) — One person making the choice to become an organ donor can save up to eight lives and can enhance the lives of 75 others through tissue donation.

For West Virginia Donor Day on Friday, staff from WVU Medicine United Hospital Center came together to honor organ donors and encourage those who aren't already signed up to be donors to consider the opportunity.

About 60% of Americans are signed up to be organ donors. However, West Virginia lags behind the pack, said UHC Director of Critical Care Kara Elko.

"We are not close to 60% national average, and we have a lot of people on the (waiting) list," she said.



Critical Care Director Kara Elko and Charge Nurse Olivia Karelis helped staff members, patients, and visitors sign up to become organ donors.

Across the nation there are over 100,000 people waiting to receive an organ transplant. Of those on the list the vast majority are in need of a kidney. There were nearly 90,000 patients waiting for a kidney in September 2024, according to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services' Health Resources & Services Administration.

In West Virginia alone there are about 500 people waiting for an organ transplant.

Patients with severe illness and those who've suffered major trauma are kept on the critical care unit.

"It can be stressful when patients pass away. But then be able to provide that hope for (their families), that they're going to help save lives is pretty incredible," Elko said.

Sometimes the families of patients will choose to donate their loved one's organs while they are on life support.

"It's difficult for families when they have to make that decision. But if you personally go ahead and make that decision, it's much easier on families when the time comes," Elko said.

Olivia Karelis, critical care charge nurse, said sometimes families have misconceptions about what organ donation entails.

"They are under the impression that we are keeping the patient alive. However, the patient has to be deemed brain dead," she said. "They're not actually on life support. They are on a ventilator. So that way, we can assist them with breathing to help to continue to oxygenate their organs."

Some people also fear that organ donation can compromise the overall integrity of the body, Karelis said. However, "it does not hinder if you wanted an open casket or anything."

Advances in technology have increased the success rate of transplants and improved the longevity of donated organs.

"It is an incredible gift and the emotions that go with it goes from the nursing side and the family side," Elko said. "It can be a complicated conversation, but it's also so important, and it's really touching to be able to be part of that."

More than 48,000 organ transplants were conducted in the United States in 2024, but each day 13 people waiting for a transplant die without receiving one.

More organ donors are needed to bring those numbers down.

As part of UHC's Donor Day celebration, the Elko and Karelis were on site helping people sign up to become a donor.

"It's just kind of like that true final act of kindness, and it's really, it's a big decision. It's not something to be taken lightly. You know, it's a big choice to choose to do this, but it's just such an enormous act of kindness and you never know whenever it's going to be you," Karelis said.