

## **Guest Opinion**

### **New Law Streamlines Organ and Tissue Donation**

By: Rep. Lesil McGuire (R-Anchorage)

Organ and tissue transplants save lives.

Most Americans agree with this statement. However, many people don't stop to think that transplants aren't possible without donation. Without the gift of life-saving organs and tissues, no transplants occur.

In 2003, there were over 25,000 organ transplants done in this country. There were almost 900,000 tissue transplants done. These numbers are impressive, and are representative of the caring and concern for others, often strangers, shown by most Americans.

However, these numbers don't tell the whole story. As of May, there are over 85,000 people in this country that are on the organ transplant waiting list. Sadly, 17 of these people die every day, waiting for a donation that does not come in time.

You may ask, "Why don't more people donate?" The answers aren't entirely obvious. While most people can be tissue donors, it takes a very specific set of circumstances for a person to become an organ donor. Last year, less than 15,000 deaths in this country met the criteria for organ donation; of these 15,000 people who died, only about half were organ donors.

So why did the other half not become donors?

First, many of them had not designated whether they wished to be donors upon their death.

Second, even people who do want to be donors are often unclear on what they have to do to make their wishes clearly known.

Third, there is a very small window of time after a person dies when they can be a donor. Often circumstances preclude families or medical personnel from considering donation until the time has passed; this person is then unable to be a donor, regardless of their wishes.

Finally, there are many myths surrounding the topic of donation, and these untrue horror stories keep many generous, well-meaning people from making their wishes known.

Alaska has one of the highest donation rates in the nation; we are a state of people that know that no one survives here alone. We all need our friends, neighbors, and the occasional kindness of strangers to pull us out of a ditch. However, due to our small

population, Alaska does not have its own organ transplant center. We use the big organ transplant centers in Washington, Oregon, California, and Utah to make sure Alaskans get the transplants they need.

In late 2003, my office began working closely with the Department of Motor Vehicles and Life Alaska, looking for ways to increase participation and registration. As a result of these efforts, I sponsored legislation that would allow the DMV to partner even more closely with Life Alaska to establish an electronic donor registry here in Alaska. [House Bill 337](#) was passed unanimously by the State House in March of this year, and recently passed the State Senate; again, the vote was unanimous. We anticipate that Governor Murkowski will sign this legislation into law in the very near future.

HB337 allows the DMV to include, in their standard list of questions asked of everyone applying for a new or renewed drivers license, two simple questions:

1. Do you wish to be an organ and tissue donor at the time of your death?
2. Would you like to donate \$1 to help support the State Registry and to help fund public awareness and public outreach?

If yes to the first question your indication to be an organ and tissue donor will be added to the electronic registry and a small red heart logo will appear on your new digital driver's license. If no, your information goes no further and your name will not be included in the registry.

Let us show the rest of the nation that the hearts of our residents are as big as this majestic state we are all so privileged in which to live. I ask all Alaskans to join me in giving the gift of life. Please, become an organ and tissue donor and inform your loved ones of your wishes.