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Undying selflessness

New law makes organ donations easier

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By **HANK BECKMAN** For The Sun

Mark Pobreski's untimely death in January broke the hearts of many.

"He was a wonderful son and an all-around great guy," his mother, Eve, of Naperville, said recently in an emotional telephone interview. "He will be remembered as very kind and compassionate."

But as hard as his death from complications from diabetes was for her, she gets some small consolation from knowing that her son's decision to become an organ donor has given life to others.

Mark Pobreski, 38, and a graduate of Downers Grove North High School, donated four organs, including his heart, to patients in need of transplants. The job of notifying his next-of-kin, in his case his mother, fell to staff at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Chicago, and Gift of Hope, a nonprofit agency that promotes organ donation.

"I can't give enough kudos to those people," Eve Pobreski said. "It's a tough job."

While Illinois has the oldest donor registry in the country, dating back to 1992, it was only in 2006 that the state passed legislation creating a First-Person Consent Organ/Tissue Donor Registry, changing the process involved in organ donation and does not require family consent.

Before, a person took the initiative and changed his or her driver's license to indicate he or she wanted his or her organs donated to needy individuals.

But it wasn't that simple.

Legally, hospitals and medical personnel were still required to get consent from the deceased person's next-of-kin. And doing so sometimes proved difficult.

Survivors often have no idea that a loved one wished to donate their organs.

"Families are unique," Dave Bosch, communications director for Gift of Hope, said. "Parents might make a different decision. Many will say, 'If my loved one made that decision,' and give it their approval. But many don't ... This legislation is a way for the donor to say, 'What I say goes.'"

But if the legalities have changed, the delicate nature of the situation remains.

"It is a sensitive thing," said Sue Durkin, clinical nurse specialist in Advocate Good Samaritan Hospital's Critical Care Unit. "And a very complicated and confusing procedure ... a person has expressed their wish to be a donor."

Durkin stressed that the families of a critically ill patient were still contacted by GOH to begin the process of organ donation. Only after a lengthy review process is completed does the actual donation process begin.

"We've been able to provide more organs for donors," Durkin said of the effect of the First-Person Registry. "Seventy-five percent of the people who are potential donors end up saving lives."

Good Samaritan has been recognized by GOH with a Medal of Honor for two straight years for its efforts in organ donation.

GOH lists nationwide figures of more than 100,000 people on waiting lists for vital organs. Illinois has a waiting list of 4,700; Indiana's is 900. Eighteen people die each day waiting for transplants.

While Illinois' old donor registry had 6 million people on it, 4.5 million already have signed up for the First-Person Registry.

For Eve Pobreski, there can't be enough.

"Four people are alive today because of him (her son)," she said. "He's staying alive through those people."