

THE COLUMBIA CHRONICLE

Organ donor registry challenges students

by Sean Stillmaker

While registering students to vote becomes prevalent before election time, health officials are seeking students to register a part of them closer to their heart-and other organs.

Illinois college students began the second annual statewide competition last week, called Campus Challenge, to register students to be organ donors. The challenge is sponsored by Donate Life, which is a nonprofit agency that coordinates organ and tissue donation.

“More and more people are realizing they need to register; those who aren’t don’t know the importance,” said Vicky Tulcus, Chicago metro community outreach coordinator.

Eligibility for organ donation requires registration in Illinois’ first-person consent registry. Signing the back of a license as an organ donor does not constitute a legally binding agreement. The Illinois first-person consent law was enacted in January of 2006 because families were overturning their loved ones’ wishes to donate their organs.

A 2005 study by the Gift of Hope, an affiliate of Donate Life, found 20 percent of organ donor decisions were overturned by families.

“The [first-person consent] law means the donor is making the decision themselves, taking the burden off the family,” Tulcus said.

Georgia, Mississippi and New York are the only three states that don’t have a first-person consent law where organ donor decisions are left to the next of kin, said Mary Schlereth, Community Engagement Coordinator for the Illinois Eye-Bank, an affiliate of Donate Life.

With a shortage of budget and staff, Donate Life turned to colleges last year to help create awareness and register donors.

“College students provide a critical voice,” said Scott Meis, Donate Life campaign manager.

Last year, 20 colleges participated in the Campus Challenge, registering 2,500 students total. Northern Illinois University won, registering 484 people.

These numbers exceeded expectations, Meis said. The initial goal last year was 10 colleges and 2,000 registered students.

Running from Oct. 1 to Nov. 14, the goal is to register 3,000 students. Currently, there are 18 schools competing, however, Columbia is not one of them.

“I’m sure that number will increase because any college can join at any time,” Meis said.

Any student at an Illinois college can register their school in the competition via Donate Life campaign managers or the campus challenge Facebook group.

“Facebook is a great way to learn about the cause and the great part is everyone is on it,” said Warren Grove, public relations chair of Loyola.

Last year, Loyola registered 75 students; the goal this year is 200, said Grove.

“It’s such a simple process,” said Liz Durkin, a senior at Loyola who is participating in the challenge. “But a lot of students don’t know.”

“College students are receptive but are not aware of the first-person consent law,” Meis said.

A 2006 statewide study by Fako Associates found that 18-to-22-year-olds are the most receptive to organ donating, but are the least likely to take action.

To help sign donors at Loyola, Grove, Durkin and her fellow members of Public Relations Student Society of America will be setting up tables at the campuses and initiating “guerrilla marketing,” Durkin said.

“If I don’t need my organs, I would feel great to give them to someone who does need them,” Grove said.

“We bury millions of [possibly donated] organs nationwide each year,” said Liz Hager, Illinois regional coordinator for organ donors. “There are needless, senseless deaths that can be saved through donors.”

Hager has been working with the Illinois organ donating program since its inception in 1982. Illinois was the first state to implement a usable online registry in 1991.

“The old registry was the largest in the nation [with] 6 million people,” Hager said. Since the 2006 first-person consent law, each individual on the old registry has to be re-registered in the new registry, by law they cannot be transferred over.

Donate Life's goal through the Campus Challenge and various initiatives is to have 5 million people registered by April 2009. There are currently 3.8 million in the first-person consent registry.

Illinois is the national leader in organ donor registration because of its strong affiliations with organ donating agencies and relationship with the Secretary of State, Tulcus said.

Jesse White, Illinois Secretary of State, spearheaded the first person-consent registry legislation and gives support at organ donation awareness events, Tulcus said.

"Illinois is the first state to implement it with the DMV," Hager said.

Potential organ donors can register at driver services facilities, it is also asked with the renewal of license.

"It's a great idea because it's the one place people have to go once every four years," Schlereth said.

Letters to 18-year-olds in Illinois were sent out in April and July describing the importance of organ donation and asking to register: 14,500 replied.

For more information about campus campaigning for Donate Life Illinois go to DonateLifeIllinois.org/DonateLife/Our-Campus-Campaign.htm.