New Question for Drivers: Organ Donor?

Effort to Boost New York's Participation, Which Lags Behind the Rest of the U.S.

By Laura Kusisto

When New Yorkers go to get a driver's license Thursday, they will confront a new question: What do they want to happen to their organs when they die?

The new line on driver's license applications will ask people whether they want to be added to the organ donor registry by selecting either "yes" or "skip this question," an effort to improve organ-donation rates, which in New York lag behind the rest of the country. "Other states have enrollment rates double, triple New York State," said state Sen. David Carlucci, who sponsored the bill behind this effort, which passed in 2012.

Just under 13% of New Yorkers join the state registry, as a percentage of driver's licenses and ID cards issued, compared with a national average of 42%, according to Donate Life America. Experts said the need for organs is likely to rise as rates of diabetes—which can cause kidney failure—go up.

There is no single explanation for why New Yorkers donate organs less, but experts said it could include a religiously diverse population and the fast pace of life in urban centers.

Along with California and New Jersey, New York is one of the first states to make an organ donation question mandatory on driver's license applications, according to Ted Lawson, executive director and president of Save Lives Now New York Foundation, an organ-donation advocate group.

The bill is dubbed "Lauren's Law" for Lauren Shields, who was one of Mr. Carlucci's constituents. Four years ago, Ms. Shields, 13 years old, had a month-and-a-half to get a heart transplant after she was diagnosed with heart failure. "I was declining so quickly, it wasn't that long because I was declining so quickly. I was put on life support," she said.

Ms. Shields said she thinks New York's organ donation rates are low "because there's so many myths out there about organ donation, that if you're an organ donor they won't try to save you in the hospital. Most people don't really think about it."

The bill initially looked like it might stall because Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver had reservations on behalf of religious constituents who have restrictions on organ donation, according to health advocates and Richard Gottfried, chairman of the Assembly Health Committee. Aides for Mr. Silver said they were satisfied with the compromise that was struck between religious groups who wanted a clear "no" option and organ-donation advocates who wanted it to say "not at this time."
Mr. Lawson said the bill represents an important step, but he isn't confident it will meaningfully improve donation rates.

After California put in place a similar requirement a couple of years ago, it has only seen a modest increase in donations, he noted. His group is lobbying the state Legislature for mandatory high-school education on organ donation and incentives for people to donate certain organs like kidneys while they're still alive.

"Our first step was to get something like Lauren's Law. I mean that’s the lowest of lowest hanging fruit on the tree," Mr. Lawson said.

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