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# MINORITY DONOR AWARENESS MONTH HIGHLIGHTS URGENT NEED

BY SANDRA GUY  
 For the Sun-Times

August's designation as National Minority Donor Awareness Month shines a spotlight on the huge gap between the number of organ donors and the number of African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans awaiting lifesaving organs and tissues.

Statewide, 1,477 African Americans await organs, but only 172 African Americans became donors in 2019, according to data compiled by the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network in Illinois.

In the Latino community, 826 are on the waiting list, while just 129 Hispanic Americans became donors.

Among Asian Americans, 240 are on the waiting list, while only 24 Asian Americans became organ donors.

While organs aren't matched based on ethnicity, the critical qualities for donor/recipient matching — compatible blood types and tissue markers — are more likely to be found among members of the same ethnicity, according to the Illinois secretary of state's office.

In Illinois, nearly 7 million people are registered as organ and tissue donors, with 4,000 awaiting transplants. The majority of

those awaiting transplants suffer from kidney and liver disease.

Nationwide, 113,648 people are waiting for an organ or tissue donor, according to the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network. While 28.7% of people waiting for transplants are Black, they accounted for only 12.5% of organ donors in 2019, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health.

Two African American families and one Latino family in the Chicago area know well how precious an organ donation can be. All three families worked with the not-for-profit organ procurement organization Gift of Hope — [giftofhope.org](http://giftofhope.org) — when organ donation entered their lives.

In a life-giving twist of fate, Tanisha Aguayo of University Park received a new heart five years ago from the daughter of her sister's best friend just as Aguayo was near death from congestive heart failure.

Aguayo initially declined, saying she felt "like a vulture" as she and her sister Monica



Tanisha Aguayo  
 PROVIDED



Domonique Antoinette "Nikki" Smith  
 PROVIDED

Stevens visited the deathbed of 18-year-old Domonique Antoinette "Nikki" Smith, a Valparaiso University pre-med student who excelled in acting, dancing, singing, music and languages. Smith drowned in a swimming pool.

Smith's mother, Vicki Walker, insisted that her daughter's heart be donated to Aguayo. The heart proved to be a 100% match.

Pre-transplant surgery, Aguayo, 45, could barely stand or even take a deep breath while on a battery-operated heart pump. She said that, when she awoke from the heart transplant, she couldn't believe the pounding in her chest.

"The [surgeons] said, 'You have a champion heart,'" she said.

"I can lay my head on your chest and hear my baby's heartbeat," Walker, 54, of Hazel Crest, told

Aguayo.

Smith's organs saved the lives of three others — both her lungs went to one recipient; her liver and left kidney to a second and her right kidney to a barbershop client of Walker's husband. The family also donated Smith's

## HOW TO BECOME AN ORGAN DONOR

Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White has a section of his office's organ donor website devoted to August's National Minority Donor Awareness Month. Called "Wave Away the Waiting," it lists three ways to become an organ donor:

- ◆ Go online to [lifegoeson.com](http://lifegoeson.com).
- ◆ Call toll-free (800) 210-2106.
- ◆ Go to any secretary of state's office.

pancreas to cancer research.

Janet Galan-Correa of Belmont-Cragin, said her father, who brought the family from his native Mexico to Chicago to pursue a better life, had talked about his desire to save others' lives by some day donating his skin tissue and organs.

"He was a kind, loving man," she said of Agustin Galan, a construction worker who loved to craft wood furniture.

When Galan died after a heart attack at 54 in May 2019, the family donated his kidneys to two people, and doctors saved his skin tissue. In the past year, Galan's skin tissue has helped 108 people, including burn victims and people with skin conditions who need grafts.



Agustin Galan  
 PROVIDED

"That gave me a little joy," said Galan-Correa, 24. "And since skin tissue can be saved up to five years, imagine how much more [that donation] can help."

Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White said he's hopeful the donor registration numbers will improve. The Illinois General Assembly passed a law in 2018 that White initiated allowing 16- and 17-year-olds consent to register as donors. That has helped add 89,000 young organ donors in the past two years, he said.

"I also speak regularly at churches, and I say, 'Give blood when you're alive and well. When you're no longer here, give organs,'" said White, who credited a kidney donation with enabling his sister Doris Ivy to live 29 years longer than expected.

Ivy was 83 when she died in June 2018. White and the Chicago families said they regularly dispel myths about organ and tissue donation, including people's inaccurate beliefs that doctors will refrain from treating their illnesses so that the hospitals can snatch their organs and that their organs will be sold to wealthy families. Such unethical behavior is prohibited by medical and government regulations.

Sandra Guy is a freelance writer.