

Telling Our Story

A National Public Education Initiative to Strengthen Trust in Organ Donation and Transplantation

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Background/Purpose

The success of organ donation and transplantation depends upon public trust. Every authorization conversation, donor registration, and transplant opportunity ultimately rests upon the public's confidence that the donation process is ethical, transparent, and patient-centered.

In recent years, the donation and transplantation community has experienced increased public scrutiny surrounding rare, highly publicized cases involving donation practices and end-of-life care. Although these events represent a very small fraction of all donation activity, they have generated widespread misconceptions regarding donor evaluation, death determination, organ allocation, and the safeguards that govern donation.

The complexity of the donation process and the absence of coordinated public education have allowed misinformation and misunderstanding to fill this knowledge gap. The resulting erosion of trust has the potential to negatively influence donor registration, family authorization, and public confidence in the donation system. 2025 marked the first year in 14 where there was a decrease in overall deceased donor numbers; importantly, there was the first decline in kidney donors in 10 years (15,937 kidney donors in 2024, 15,274 in 2025 (-663 donors or 4.2% decrease) which led to 116 less kidney transplants nationally.

Methods/Approach

The proposed campaign would utilize a multi-faceted educational strategy involving:

- National and local media engagement.
- Community outreach and public speaking initiatives.
- Social media and digital education campaigns.
- Educational materials explaining donation processes and safeguards.
- Transparent explanations of brain death, circulatory death, and organ allocation.
- Patient, donor family, and recipient storytelling.
- Partnerships with hospitals, schools, faith communities, and advocacy organizations.
- Rapid-response communications addressing misinformation and emerging concerns.

Educational content would focus on demystifying the donation process and highlighting the rigorous ethical, medical, and regulatory safeguards that exist throughout the donation and transplantation continuum.

Through evaluation of OPTN/HRSA, NSODAP, SRTR we sought to project what the potential impacts of a successful education program would be in the context of the following reality:

Despite over 170 million registered organ, eye, and tissue donors in the US (~60% of the eligible adult population) and ~3 million deaths in 2024 there were only 16,989 deceased donors. This mean of the registered donors, 0.00999% became one in 2024 (1 deceased donor for every 10,000 registered donors per year). Deceased donors as a percentage of all deaths was worse (16,988 donors out of 3,000,000 equaled 0.566% of all deaths or 1 deceased donor for every 177 deaths).

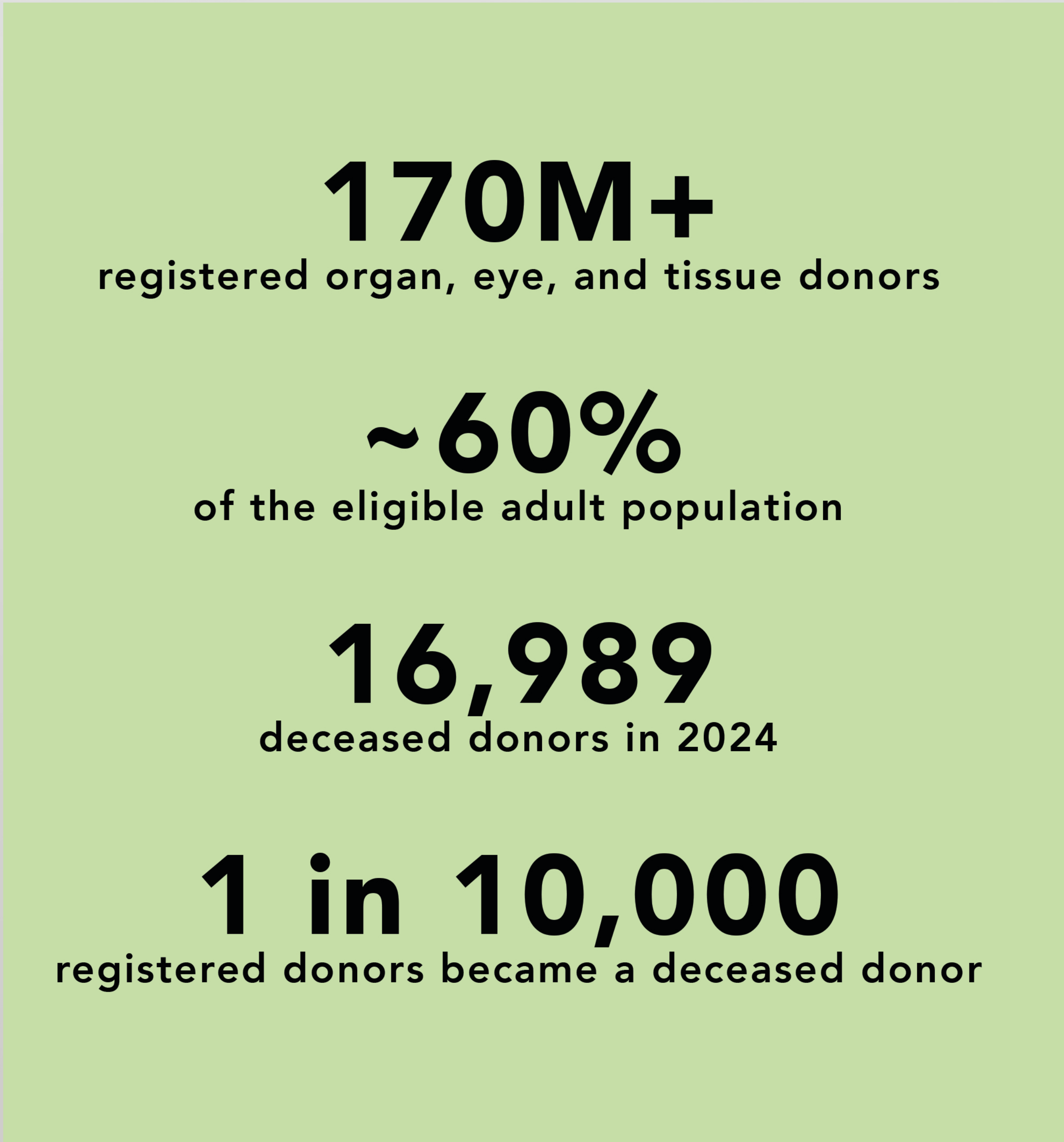
Results/Solutions

The proposed initiative seeks to improve public understanding of organ donation and transplantation. It will:

- Increase transparency regarding donation practices.
- Strengthen trust in Organ Procurement Organizations and transplant centers.
- Improve confidence in donor registration and family authorization processes.
- Equip donation professionals with tools to address misinformation.
- Create consistent national messaging while allowing local adaptation.

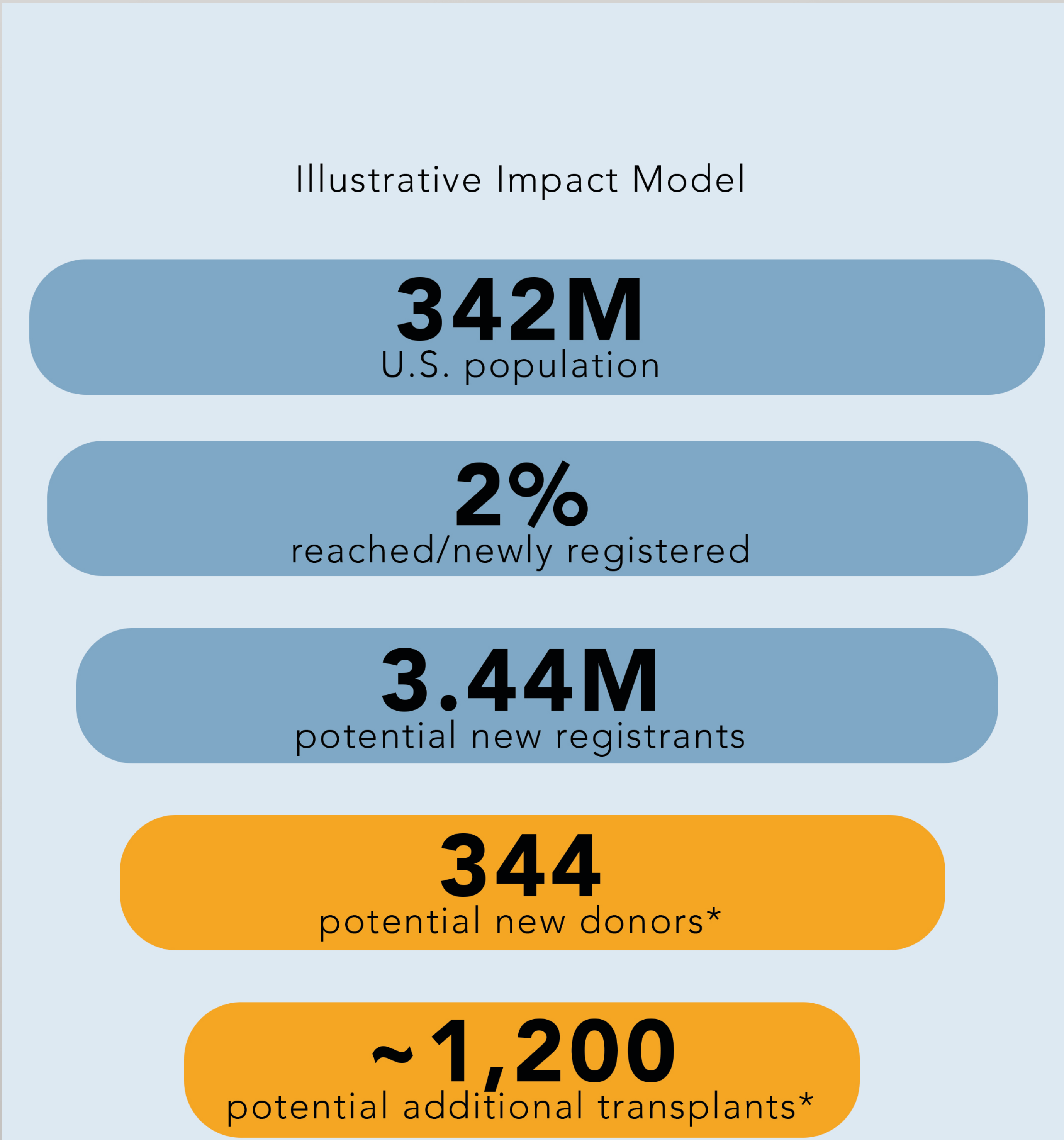
Most importantly, the campaign seeks to ensure that isolated events and misconceptions do not define public perception of an entire system that saves thousands of lives each year. Utilizing coordination of local, regional, and national collaborative framework it is conceivable that 2% of the remaining 342 million American population (~172 million) could yield 3.44 million new registrants. Utilizing the same likelihood for donation above, with 1 donor for every 10,000 registrants there could be 344 new donors. Assuming 3.5 organs transplanted per donor there would be 1,190 additional transplants. Additionally, if education increased donor conversion even by 1%, it would yield an additional 170 donors and 595 transplants.

Why Trust Matters



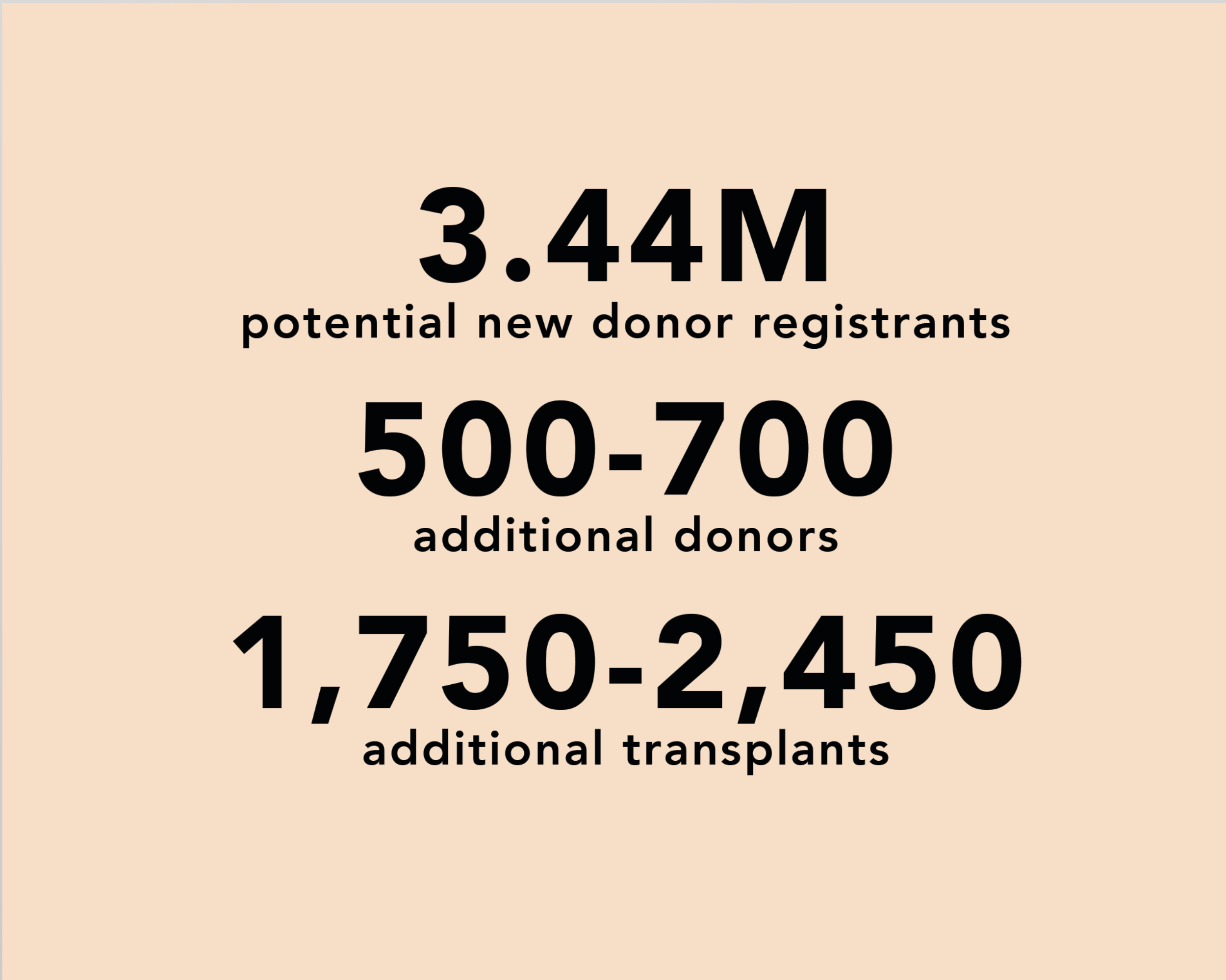
Evaluation Framework

Using national data sources including OPTN/HRSA, NSODAP, and SRTR, we modeled the potential impact of a successful education initiative on donor registration and donor conversion. The projections below are illustrative and assume that increased education produces measurable gains in registration and authorization while existing donor eligibility patterns remain similar.



**Based on 1 donor per 10,000 registrants and ~3.5 organs transplanted per donor*

Projected Impact



Discussion/Conclusion

The donation and transplantation community has long excelled at performing life-saving work but has been less successful in explaining that work to the public it serves. Trust is foundational infrastructure for organ donation. Without it, every aspect of the donation process is at risk.

As the transplant community continues to pursue growth, innovation, and equity, there is an equally important responsibility to educate the public, communicate transparently, and proactively tell the story of donation and transplantation. A coordinated national education initiative represents an opportunity to strengthen trust, protect donor intent, and preserve the gift of life for future generations. It is conceivable if not realistic and probable that such a coordinated campaign could yield 3.44 million new registrants, between 500-700 additional donors, and between 1,750 and 2,450 additional transplants. Education is directly tied to the number of individuals who register as donors and the number of those individuals or families who say "yes" to donation when it matters most.

Data Sources/Notes

OPTN / HRSA • NSODAP • SRTR
Illustrative projections are intended to demonstrate potential scale, not guarantee outcomes.

The Opportunity

This initiative proposes a comprehensive, local and national public education campaign designed to proactively tell the story of organ donation and transplantation, increase transparency, and improve understanding of how donation works.

With approximately 3 million deaths annually, deceased donors represented only about 0.566% of all deaths in 2024 - roughly 1 donor for every 177 deaths. Public education cannot change medical eligibility, but it can strengthen understanding, registration, authorization, and confidence at the moments when donation becomes possible.