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Andre Ford attends his dialysis appointment Wednesday, July 24, at DaVita Dialysis Center, 8109 S. Western Ave., Chicago. Photo courtesy: Tony Martin

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Giving the gift of life: African Americans and organ donation

By Janelle Frost
MANAGING EDITOR

Andre Ford loved seeing his family members, dressed in their military uniforms, come home during the holidays. Those family members inspired him to want to go into the service. So his goal was to join the U.S. Armed Forces after high school, retire at 55 and still have his whole life ahead of him.

But those plans changed at 17 when Ford got his physical test results. Ford, now 33, was told he would not be accepted into the Armed Forces because he had proteinuria, which is an abnormal amount of protein in the urine — often a sign of kidney disease.

"I didn't understand why," Ford said about not being accepted into the military. "At 17, I was healthy. I was strong."

Two weeks after he got married at 28, Ford found out his kidneys failed. He has been on Illinois' waiting list for a kidney transplant for the past 22 months, and recently applied to three other states to be put on their waiting lists.

Like Ford, a lot of African Americans are in need of organ donation and transplantation, but even fewer are giving organ donation affidavits, says Zopp. While 29 percent of the total candidates currently waiting for transplants are Blacks, they comprised 14 percent of organ donors in 2012, according to data as of Jan. 18 from the U.S. Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network.

Some "minorities," especially African Americans, are not registering as donors because there's a perception that minorities do not have equal access to organs for transplantation, and some have a mistrust of medical establishments and institutions, afraid that they will not receive the best medical treatment in a life-threatening emergency if they were a known organ donor, according to the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network (OPTN).

Also, most are not aware of the large number of minorities who are waiting for transplants.

Approximately 1.8 million nationwide are on the National Minority Donor Awareness Week to educate minorities of the need for donation and transplantation within the African American community, and how people can

become registered donors. As of July 26, more than 35,000 African Americans nationwide are waiting for organ transplants, according to OPTN. Of that number, more than 33,000 African Americans are waiting for kidney transplants. In Illinois, more than 2,000 Blacks are waiting for organs, while more than 1,900 of them are waiting for kidneys.

There is a greater need for kidneys than any other organ among all ethnicities. For those patients like Ford, the lack of available organs means longer waiting periods on transplant lists, more time spent on dialysis, and sometimes death, according to the OPTN.

There are some success stories like Sidney McCray III, who learned in 2005 that his kidney wasn't functioning properly.

The 58-year-old Cassary Club Hills resident had a kidney transplant in September 2012 after spending five years on dialysis, which left him drained and tired. The only way to keep himself going was to hold onto hope of getting a kidney transplant.

"I think if more people understood how this could help continue life...they would be more receptive to organ donations," said McCray, who worked more than 20 years as campus police. "My quality of life is good. I have more energy. I hopefully can go back to work soon. It's been a tremendous blessing for me and my family."

McCray, who has two children, was able to get a kidney donated for transplant through Gift of Hope, a nonprofit organ procurement organization that coordinates organ and tissue donation and provides donor family services and public education in Illinois and north-west Indiana.

Gift of Hope is also part of Donor Life Illinois, a coalition of agencies responsible for organ, tissue, eye, blood and marrow donation, and donor education and registration in Illinois.

Life Goes On! is a national program, another member agency of Donor Life Illinois, will send "Wave Anybody" and "Wave Anybody" messages to encourage organ donation.

The "Waiting" donor registration drive and news conference held by the Secretary of State's office from 9:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Thursday, August 1, at James R. Thompson Center



Andre Ford attends his dialysis appointment Wednesday, July 24, at DaVita Dialysis Center, 8109 S. Western Ave., Chicago. Photo courtesy: Tony Martin

100 W Randolph St., Chicago. Jack Lynch, director of community affairs for Gift of Hope, Organ & Tissue Donor Network, said organ donation has to improve.

"Even though we're the state of Illinois doing better than the rest of the country, what does that mean? There are too many organs being recovered," Lynch said. "Recovery is less than 20 percent for all organs needed for transplantation. In the Black community, the only thing that has gone up is the demand. Unfortunately, more Blacks have ended up on dialysis."

Ford, who was referred to a kidney specialist when he was 28, goes three days a week to dialysis at the DaVita Dialysis Center in Chicago. At 28 when his kidneys failed, his life was turned around and he had to quit his job at a bank due to how dialysis leaves him feeling.

"Either you do well or you don't do well," Ford said. "But I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. On six days, I'm really sick. Dialysis is like being on a never-ending rollercoaster."

In addition, there's insomnia and headaches, Ford said.

Days Ford goes to dialysis are not days he can work, go to school or play with his kids, said the father of three, who is studying at Malcolm X College to be a physician assistant.

But Ford remains positive and shares his story with others to educate and motivate people about organ donation.

He even hosted, with the help of Gift of

Hope and American Kidney Fund, an Organ Donor Awareness Benefit Concert last year at St. Luke Missionary Baptist Church to educate people on the importance of becoming a donor, and to give free kidney health screenings.

One of 50 people seated at the concert, three were interested in being a donor and went for more testing, but didn't go through with becoming a donor in the end, Ford said.

"The end result, I still don't have a kidney," said Ford, whose goal is to possibly have his wait time on Illinois' waiting list transferred to another state's list, which could speed up the time he has to wait for a kidney transplant.

He would have to live in that area for some time, but wouldn't be able to pay living expenses without work.

"I would live in my car for a transplant. It's that serious," Ford said.

The fact there's a large number of minorities who are waiting for transplants can be changed through awareness and education, officials said. A single donor can save or heal the lives of more than 50 people, according to OPTN data.

"If you offer awareness with...education, Blacks are not less willing than any other group once you reach and teach them," Lynch said. "When we know more, we will do more."

Note: To become a donor in your state, visit www.giftofhope.org, or DonorLifeIllinois.org to register or learn more about organ, eye and tissue donation.

http://content.yudu.com/Library/A2bpgw/ChicagoDefenderJuly3/resources/index.htm?referrerUrl=http://free.yudu.com/public/finish_now/1009219

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