

# Heroes Wanted

by Shannon Ross

The organ transplant waiting list currently holds over 118,000 people, 18 of whom die every day.

Nevertheless, the list continues to grow every day with mothers, sons, best friends, and more, many of them praying their lives will be extended and their quality of life improved by the generosity of someone choosing to part with a vital organ. These individuals, of course, may now or very well one day be our loved ones, or even us.

Unfortunately, only a couple of states allow people in prison to donate, and then only in certain cases. If allowed to donate, less than 5% of the U.S. incarcerated population could eliminate the current need for kidneys (about 103,000). Evidence demonstrates considerable desire to donate among those of us doing time. In Arizona, as part of the I.DO! program, more than 10,000 Maricopa County jail residents registered to be donors. The problem is that medical policymakers are letting outdated concerns prevent those in need from accessing this wellspring of healthy organs.

Some of these concerns were actually valid in the past, such as the above average disease rate in incarcerated communities and the fact that incarcerated people are more susceptible to abuse and coercion. However, these concerns have been largely addressed by medical advancements (like HIV and Hepatitis C screening), the government's active solicitation of donors from

communities with higher disease rates than jails and prisons, and the public's and media's (thus the government's) heightened sensitivity toward the mistreatment of disadvantaged groups such as the incarcerated. However, continued vigilance is needed to continue to protect the rights and health of currently incarcerated

people, who may still be susceptible to coercion prior to donation and will need post-operative care within the prison system after donation.

So many of us in prison wish, and in some cases are starving, to do something positive. Whether in response to the constant feeling of insignificance brought on by incarceration, or for atonement or the self-fulfillment of helping others, we are eager to show our value, to be relevant in the real world. Donating an organ is undoubtedly one of the best ways to do this. With kidney donation, the most viable option for incarcerated people, one kidney is capable of handling the body's required workload. Additionally, one study of kidney donors on the outside showed that those who donate lead healthy lives and enjoy an excellent quality of life. Donors may come out of the experience happier, as the pride of donating can increase their contentment and self-worth. This can potentially, among other things, lower stress and depression.

I'm currently trying to get an exemption from the DOC regulation here in Wisconsin that allows people in prison to donate only to family members. This would allow me to donate my kidney to one of the dozens of interested individuals on [matchingdonors.com](http://matchingdonors.com) who share my blood type. In the long run, though, I'm trying to get the restrictions on organ donation by incarcerated people removed, not only here but nationwide. Ideally, many of you will push for identical progress in your respective states or join the existing effort spearheaded by GAVE (Gifts of Anatomical Value for Everyone). But if not, check out [www.gavelife.org](http://www.gavelife.org) to get virtually any info you need on the issue—such as the bill Utah just passed essentially rejecting the exaggerated claims of high-disease

risk in the prison system—and sign yourself up on the incarcerated donor registry, which is a tool used to demonstrate the willingness to donate among the incarcerated (it doesn't obligate you to do anything). Or you can contact GAVE directly at the address below to request any info or be put on the registry.

Because we're so abandoned and ignored, it's easy for us to forget just how much we have to offer. Don't let the circumstance win; fight for your relevance. Be a donor.

*GAVE*  
1631 NE Broadway, #533  
Portland, OR 97232