

# Boosting Organ Donation among Hispanics

BY RHODA WEISS

**T** rue or false? If emergency room physicians know you are an organ donor, they will not work as hard to save you. The answer is "false." Even so, the misconception is a main reason Hispanics give for not wanting to be organ donors.

Of the 80,000 Americans currently awaiting a life-saving organ transplant, more than 11,000 are Hispanic.\* In 2001 only 2,732 Hispanics received organ transplants. During the same year, 714 Hispanic men, women, and children died because there were not enough donors. In the decade between 1992 and 2002, the number of Hispanics registered on the UNOS (United Network for Organ Sharing) waiting list increased from 2,519 to 11,200, a 345 percent increase. An average 17 Americans (of all ethnicities) die each day awaiting an organ transplant.

Since genetic compatibility is important in matching donated organs to recipients, it is essential that society increase the number of Hispanic donors, who now account for 11 percent of organ donations and 3 percent of tissue donations. To that end, in the spring of 2002 the Coalition on Donation launched the first national organ and tissue donation campaign to encourage Hispanics to get the facts about the issue.

## RESEARCHING HISPANIC ATTITUDES

The Coalition on Donation, a Richmond, VA-based, not-for-profit alliance of national organizations and local affiliates formed in 1992 to educate the public about organ and tissue donation, has received more than \$350 million in donated media time and space since its first campaign in 1994. In 2000 the coalition's public service announcements (PSAs) aired more than 70,000 times. More than 16,000 of its billboards and 3,000 of its posters were visible throughout the nation in malls and bus shelters.

\*All statistics used in this article were provided by the Coalition on Donation.



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While planning the campaign aimed at Hispanics, the coalition learned that no national Spanish-language organ donation campaign had previously been attempted and that, in any kind of outreach effort concerning the health of Hispanics, most organizations did no more than make translations of their general promotional materials. A comprehensive literature and media search revealed that very little research had been performed on Hispanic attitudes toward health care and organ and tissue donation and that very few stories on organ and tissue donation appeared in the Hispanic media.

While making its analysis, the coalition learned that 85 percent of the adult Hispanic population uses the media as its main source of information. The coalition decided that the campaign's primary audience would be foreign-born or U.S.-born Hispanic adults, aged 18 to 54, who consume primarily Spanish language media.

The coalition conducted interviews with Spanish-speaking people in those U.S. cities that have the largest Hispanic concentrations: Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, and New York City. "In general, the research demonstrated that Hispanics who intended to be donors were uninformed about donation, while those against or undecided about donation were misinformed," says David Fleming, the coalition's executive director. "A significant portion of those who intended to donate had very little information and many questions about organ donations."

The study's major findings were:

- Hispanics do not like to talk about death and are averse to thinking about or planning for death, regardless of their feelings about organ donation. The general feeling is that a person might, just by talking about death, cause it to occur.

- Hispanic mistrust of the transplant network is a major barrier to organ donation.

- Many Hispanics are confused about when donations take place. Many think that if you decide to become a donor, your organs will be



taken while you're still alive.

- Most Hispanics do not realize that the Catholic Church supports organ donation.

### CHANGING HEARTS AND MINDS

"Making the decision right now to become an organ and tissue donor after you die is important and not something to be done with incorrect information," says Karen Garcia, volunteer chairperson of the coalition's Hispanic Campaign Committee. "We want Hispanics to seek out the real facts before they make up their minds."

Given the results of its research, the coalition developed a strategy to:

- Increase trust among Hispanics of the transplant system, encouraging them to actively seek out additional information
- Engender a better understanding of how organ donation occurs
- Dispel the myth that various religions oppose organ donation
- Increase understanding of the fact that "regular" people—not just wealthy people and celebrities—receive transplants

"Since, according to our research, Hispanics do not have the information they need to make informed decisions about donation, the coalition decided not to focus on increasing the number of Hispanic donors," explains Bob Spieldenner, the coalition's communications manager. "Instead, our objective was to get the correct information to Hispanics, which would enable them to make an informed decision about donation."

One communications tactic involved securing the placement of PSAs (created pro bono by an advertising agency) in the Spanish-language media, including television, radio, billboards, and print outlets. The PSAs were carried on 100 percent of Hispanic network TV stations. The coalition also created more than 250,000 Spanish-language brochures, 4,300 posters, and numerous other promotional items, distributing them to grassroots organizations for local outreach. A coalition-created website resulted in an average 1,000 visits a month.

To maximize the campaign's reach, the coalition pitched news stories to national and local Hispanic media, beginning with one keyed to a kickoff event in New York City. After the coalition put out a news release highlighting the

research results and the campaign launch, stories about organ donation appeared in 47 Hispanic media outlets.

The coalition also established a new Spanish-language toll-free phone number to take requests for information on organ donation. Since the campaign began, the number has drawn nearly 300 callers a month, each of which receives a brochure from the coalition and a follow-up call from a local organization.

In addition, the coalition developed a campaign implementation guide to help local organizations participate in the national campaign. The guide's binder contains a local media toolbox, tips for the placement of PSAs, research findings, and other information.

### BROADENING THE CAMPAIGN

A similar campaign, aimed at the African-American community, was launched in December 2002. Meanwhile, the coalition's Hispanic Campaign Committee is completing work on the second phase of its initiative; this involves promoting the campaign's website, creating partnerships and employee campaigns, and increasing the distribution of media materials.

Catholic organizations are invited to join the campaign by encouraging organ donations among employees, physicians, volunteers, board members, patients, and other members of their local communities. In addition, Catholic organizations can publish articles in their internal and external newsletters; educate physicians and other staff members (materials for health care professionals can be found at [www.unos.org](http://www.unos.org) in the "Resources" section); place their own organ-donation information (and links to it) on the coalition's website; and cooperate with other local organ-donation groups, employers (see the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services "Donate Life" site at [www.organdonor.gov](http://www.organdonor.gov), which has appropriate downloadable information in its "Workplace Partnership for Life" section), media, and the general community.

*For more information on the Coalition on Donation, contact Bob Spieldenner at 804-782-4863 or visit the coalition's website at [www.shareyourlife.org](http://www.shareyourlife.org). The Spanish-language site is at [www.donevida.org](http://www.donevida.org).*

*Catholic  
organizations  
are invited  
to join the  
organ  
donation  
campaign.*

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