

Message from Yolanda Becker, M.D., re: OPTN and geographic distribution

Date: June 6, 2018

From: Yolanda Becker, M.D., President, OPTN/UNOS Board of Directors

To: Transplant program directors
Transplant program administrators
OPO chief executive officers/executive directors
OPO procurement administrators/managers
HLA laboratory directors

I want to update you on an issue of vital interest to the transplant community. My intent is to keep our community in an ongoing creative discussion about how we honor the treasured gift of life from our donors.

From the very beginning of establishing a national transplant network, we have confronted unique challenges posed by geography. In some ways, the success of transplantation has contributed to an organ-transplant recipient imbalance. There are differences throughout our nation in the distribution of transplant centers and labs and in the size and configuration of donor service areas. In addition, there is geographic variability in the concentration of disease patterns that cause organ failure and causes of death that make organ donation possible.

We can no longer assume that we can adhere to long-held traditions of distribution. Recent legal challenges to our current organ distribution systems compel us to demonstrate that our distribution policies are logical and can be applied on a nationwide basis, consistent with the [OPTN Final Rule](#). If we cannot do so, we may entirely lose the ability to shape transplant policy based on our community's expertise. This would leave policy to be shaped by legal and political forces.

At the December 2017 OPTN/UNOS Board meeting, we created an [Ad Hoc Geography Committee](#) with representation from all regions and all organ types. We tasked the committee to do three things:

- Establish defined guiding principles for the use of geographic constraints in organ allocation
- Review and recommend frameworks/models for incorporating geographic principles into allocation policies
- Identify uniform concepts for organ specific allocation policies in light of the requirements of the OPTN Final Rule

The committee has worked diligently over the last few months and is acting on the first of those directives. They voted in unanimous support last week to recommend to the OPTN/UNOS Board, at our meeting June 11-12, a statement of principles to guide future policy relating to organ distribution.

The principles are a plain language restatement of requirements outlined in the OPTN Final Rule, Section 121.8, which is based on the fundamental premise that deceased donor organs are a national resource ([National Organ Transplant Act](#) and the Final Rule) to be distributed as broadly as feasible. They address additional factors that may serve as constraints to that overall principle, such as reducing inherent differences in donor supply and demand, reducing clinically significant travel time, increasing organ utilization and preventing wastage, and increasing efficiency of system resources. However, any such constraints must be consciously developed and consistently applied.

We will present the committee's second directive, establishing frameworks or models for incorporating these principles into policy, to our community for feedback. The ad hoc committee evaluated dozens of overall frameworks before concluding that three potential frameworks are consistent with the guiding principles. There is no predetermination on the number or methodology of these potential frameworks. We will be sharing more information on each of the frameworks, and we will seek your input on them through public comment in August and discussion at the Fall regional meetings.

Please note that all activity will take place within the context of our other National Organ Transplant Act/Final Rule requirements. These include evaluating the impact of policies on "populations with special needs, including children and individuals who are members of racial or ethnic minority groups, and among populations with limited access to transportation" and assessing "the cumulative effect of policies on socioeconomic inequities." Any policy development resulting from adoption of these principles will still be evaluated through these lenses.

We will keep you informed of developments, beginning with a summary of the Board discussion and any action on adoption of the committee's recommendations next week. These updates will always be available through Transplant Pro and the UNOS website. Please come to your regional meeting to hear presentations in person (regional meeting information will be [here](#) on Transplant Pro). The regional meeting content will also be publicly available if you cannot attend in person.

We appreciate your attention and your feedback as we address these issues of foundational importance to the future of the national transplant system.