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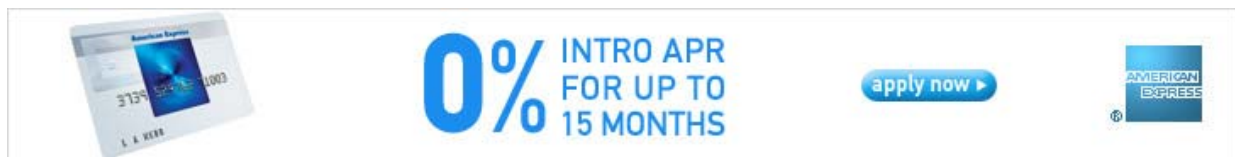
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N.J. Eyes Mandating Organ Donor Decision

TRENTON (AP) — If you ask Diane Bottino, it wasn't the hepatitis C that killed her husband last year, it was the needless waiting.

"What ultimately caused my husband to die was the shortage of organ donations," she said.

Joseph Bottino, 42, died after waiting 15 months for a liver transplant. Now his wife hopes a measure to require residents to make a decision about organ donation stops another sick person from dying the same way her husband did.

On Thursday, a New Jersey Senate committee voted to require people applying for driver's licenses and identification cards to state whether they want to be an organ donor.

The measure would also require high schools to teach about organ donation.

Howard M. Nathan, president and CEO of the Gift of Life Donor Program, said New Jersey would be the first state to impose such requirements.

"Our point is to encourage folks to have these conversations with their loved ones before they get to a hospital," said Senate President Codey, the bill sponsor. "It's designed to move the conversation from the emergency room to the living room."

About 105,000 people in the United States await organ donations, according to the United Network for Organ Sharing.

"For the first time, a state is advocating that it is the fundamental responsibility of its residents to help save another person's life," Nathan said.

While states ask license and identification applicants if they want to be an organ donor, they aren't required to answer.

Codey's bill would require applicants to answer whether they want to become an organ donor. If they decide to do so, their donor status would appear on their license and be maintained in a state registry.

If they're not ready to make a decision or uncomfortable sharing it, they would designate someone to make that decision on their behalf when the time comes.

"Let's get people talking about it at home, and many families will avoid the unnecessary heartache that is now my family's reality," said Bottino, of Haddonfield.

Sen. Joseph Vitale, the Senate health committee chairman, said the bill, which can now be considered by the full Senate, would help.

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"This will make a real difference and will over time save lives," said Vitale, D-Middlesex.

Codey, D-Essex, said he hopes other states and the federal government follow New Jersey.

Senators released the bill after rejecting claims from Motor Vehicle Commission officials who argued the requirements would prove burdensome.

"This bill puts a lot of fiscal constraint on us," said Denise Coyle, the agency's chief of staff.

Kay Pittman Govito of Moorestown said organs from her son David helped save four people. David Gregory Govito died in 2003 at age 31 in California after hitting his head on pavement after being punched.

"Four people live on because of my son," Govito said, "and I do, too, because I was able to resurrect, be a mother, be a wife, be a daughter, be a sister, because my son does live on, just not in the traditional sense."

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