



Donate Life Kentucky Trust's Donor Family Support Model

A Case Study in Supporting Families After the Gift of Life

Program Philosophy

For decades, Donate Life Kentucky has supported families who make the courageous decision to say “yes” to organ and tissue donation during the most difficult moments of their lives.

While donation saves and heals lives across the country, the days immediately following a loved one’s death can bring unexpected logistical and financial challenges for families. Donate Life Kentucky’s Donor Family Support Model provides limited, compassionate assistance when families face barriers during the immediate aftermath of donation.

Rather than offering automatic benefits or incentives for donation, the program operates independently through donor-restricted charitable funds and a board-appointed oversight committee. Assistance is only considered after donation has occurred and is never presented prior to authorization.

This model preserves the integrity and trust essential to organ and tissue donation while ensuring that donor families are not left without support during crisis.

Executive Overview

Each year, thousands of families across the United States make the selfless decision to donate their loved one’s organs and tissues. While the medical aspects of donation are handled by hospitals and Organ Procurement Organizations (OPOs), families often face immediate practical challenges once the donation process is complete. Because of federal laws designed to protect the ethical integrity of organ donation and prevent any perception of financial inducement, OPOs are not permitted to provide direct financial assistance related to funeral or personal expenses.

These challenges may include:

- funeral or cremation costs
- transportation of ashes
- temporary lodging for family members
- meals or travel during extended hospital stays
- unexpected logistical expenses following death

In many states, public resources available to assist families with funeral expenses are extremely limited, particularly in cases of sudden or unexpected death.

Donate Life Kentucky Trust developed a Donor Family Support Model designed to provide modest, compassionate assistance when families encounter financial hardship during this period.

This case study outlines the program structure so that other community organizations may understand and potentially replicate the model.

Background: Challenges Facing Families After Unexpected Death

The decision to donate organs or tissue occurs during moments of sudden tragedy. Families are navigating grief while simultaneously making arrangements for funeral services, transportation, and other logistical needs. Some families may face unexpected financial strain due to:

- sudden loss of income following a death
- travel expenses related to hospital care
- lack of access to county or public burial programs
- limited savings for funeral or cremation costs
- complex logistics when death occurs far from home

While many families rely on support from extended family, churches, or community groups, some still experience significant hardship during this time.

The Donor Family Support Model exists to provide limited assistance when those other options are not available.

Program Philosophy

Donate Life Kentucky provides compassionate, limited support to donor families when unexpected barriers arise following donation. The program is intentionally structured to protect the ethical foundation of organ and tissue donation. Assistance is:

- privately fundraised
- overseen by a board committee
- considered only after donation occurs
- never introduced during authorization discussions

This structure ensures that donation remains a purely voluntary decision while still allowing communities to care for donor families experiencing hardship.

Financial Strain Following a Sudden Loss

Many families rely on income sources that immediately stop when they cannot work, including:

- commission-based professionals such as realtors, insurance agents, financial advisors, car sales professionals, and mortgage professionals

- service and hospitality workers who rely heavily on tips, including hairstylists, restaurant servers, and personal care professionals
 - small business owners and self-employed professionals
 - independent contractors
 - hourly wage earners without paid leave
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Referral and Oversight Model

To ensure assistance is appropriate and responsibly administered, requests are reviewed through a structured process.

Referrals may come from:

- hospital care teams
- family advocates or donation professionals
- funeral homes assisting donor families

All assistance requests are reviewed by a Donor Family Fund Committee composed of committee members who oversee the program. The OPO is not involved in the Committee or any decisions-made regarding support for families.

This structure ensures:

- ethical separation from the donation authorization process
 - responsible stewardship of charitable funds
 - equitable consideration of requests
 - transparency and accountability
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Types of Assistance Provided

Because each situation is different, support may address a variety of needs identified during review.

Donor Family Support May Include:

- limited funeral or cremation assistance
- transportation of ashes when needed
- travel or lodging support for immediate family
- meals or temporary logistical assistance
- other modest support addressing immediate hardship

The goal is simple: ensure the donor and their families are treated with dignity and compassion.

Responsible Stewardship of Funds

Because charitable funds are limited, assistance must be carefully stewarded.

Key safeguards include:

- encouragement of other available resources first
- requests considered only after donation has occurred
- committee review and guidance

This approach ensures the program remains sustainable while continuing to serve families most in need.

Implications for Other Communities

While Donate Life Kentucky focuses on supporting families within the Kentucky region, the model demonstrates how other Donate Life organizations or community nonprofits can responsibly provide support to donor families without compromising ethical standards or the integrity of the donation process.

By maintaining clear separation between the donation authorization process and financial assistance programs, communities can provide basic human care and compassion to these incredible families going through the worst moments of their lives and choosing to help others.

This approach allows communities to:

- preserve public trust in organ donation
 - support donor families during moments of crisis
 - ensure responsible oversight of charitable funds
 - honor the generosity of families who chose to give the gift of life
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About Donate Life Kentucky

Donate Life Kentucky educates the public about organ, eye, and tissue donation and provides support to transplant patients, donor families, and caregivers.

Through community partnerships, education, and direct assistance programs, the organization works to ensure that every Kentuckian has access to the opportunity to give and receive the gift of life.

Contact Shelley Snyder, Executive Director (SSnyder@donatelifeky.org) with any questions.