



U. S. Department of Health and Human Services  
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Division of Transplantation



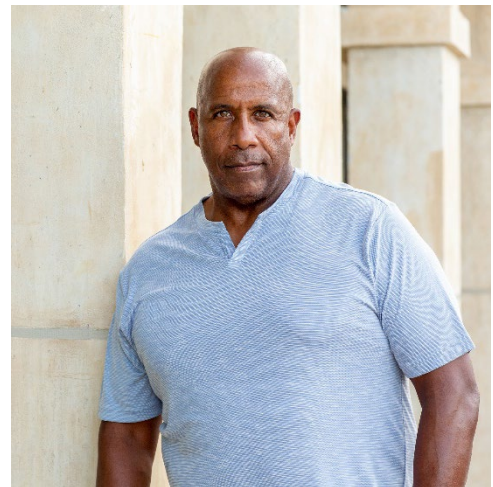
# GRANT *news*

MAY 2024 | A periodic e-bulletin to share results of organ donation and transplantation projects funded by the Division of Transplantation.

## Focus on Veterans: Increasing support for organ donation and vascularized composite allograft (VCA) transplants among men over 50

**Outreach to Veterans is a crucial step to build support for VCA transplants and organ, eye, and tissue donation in men over the age of fifty.**

Communicating the importance of organ donation to Veterans is one strategy to increase the donor registration rate among men over the age of 50, the least likely demographic to sign up as organ donors.<sup>1</sup> Among the nation's 16.5 million Veterans alive today, two-thirds are over 50 years of age and 93% are men.<sup>2</sup>



Research funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA) Division of Transplantation identified best practices for increasing organ, eye, and tissue donor registrations among Veterans and improving awareness of and support for vascularized composite allograft (VCA) transplants. Unlike traditional organ transplants,

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, Healthcare Systems Bureau. "2019 National Survey of Organ Donation Attitudes and Practices: Report of Findings." 2019. <https://www.organdonor.gov/sites/default/files/organ-donor/professional/grants-research/nsodap-organ-donation-survey-2019.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2023/acs/acs-54.pdf>

VCA transplants, which include the face, hands, and abdominal wall, involve multiple types of tissue such as skin, bone, nerves, and blood vessels.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Jim Rodrigue of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center teamed up with Matt Boger of New England Donor Services to gauge Veterans' preferences on organ donation education. The researchers' goals were to provide recommendations for how organ procurement organizations (OPOs) can effectively engage with Veterans and to learn whether traditional organ donation messaging and VCA donation messaging were more effective when shared together or separately.

### Soliciting Veterans' Attitudes and Recommendations

To learn more about baseline attitudes towards organ donation among Veterans, Dr. Rodrigue's team surveyed 1,517 Veterans from Veterans Service Organizations in New England. They found that 96% of respondents supported traditional organ, eye, and tissue donation, but only 59% were registered.<sup>4</sup> Among Veterans surveyed, support for VCA donation and transplantation ranged from 57% to 81% depending on the body part.<sup>5</sup>



*Brendan Marrocco (above) is a Veteran and VCA hand-transplant recipient. This graphic and others like it are available to download in HRSA's [Outreach Materials Library](#).*

Following the survey, Dr. Rodrigue's team organized focus groups with Veterans to learn their recommendations for improving the effectiveness of organ donation education within their community. Feedback suggested that videos should:

- be Veteran-focused
- be narrated by a Veteran
- feature testimonials from Veterans in need of transplantation or Veteran organ donor heroes
- ask Veterans to continue their service to the country by registering as organ donors
- provide a non-technical description of VCA transplantation types
- state that VCA organ donation is not part of the donor registry and is a decision made by the family

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<sup>3</sup> Learn more at <https://www.organdonor.gov/learn/what-can-be-donated/face-hands>.

<sup>4</sup> Ward S, Boger M, Fleishman A, Shenkel J, Calvo A, Pomahac B, et al. "Attitudes toward Organ, Tissue, and Vascularized Composite Allograft (VCA) Donation and Transplantation: A Survey of United States Military Veterans." 2021. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32639399/>

<sup>5</sup> According to Dr. Rodrigue, "VCA donation willingness was higher for upper and lower extremities than for face or genitourinary organs." (Rodrigue, James. "A Randomized Trial to Increase Donor Registration and VCA Donation Willingness in Veterans." 2023, p. 7).

- not sacrifice testimonial or informational content for the sake of brevity<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Rodrigue was surprised that respondents recommended videos range in length from five to ten minutes. “This is a classic example of how you can go into a situation with a bias that short videos are preferred, but the focus group tells you something different,” he said. Ultimately, Dr. Rodrigue and his team developed four videos of approximately seven minutes each. The videos were well received by participating Veterans, proving the importance of using focus groups to learn a population’s preferences.

### Evaluating Messaging Effectiveness

After incorporating the Veterans’ recommendations, Dr. Rodrigue’s team tested three organ donation videos: (1) General donation messaging, (2) Veteran-specific donation messaging with a discussion of VCA donation, and (3) Veteran-specific donation messaging without a discussion of VCA. The videos combined information and testimonials from transplant recipients and were viewed by 549 Veterans who were not registered as organ donors. The Veterans evaluated the video’s likeability, presentation of facts, cognitive arousal, and emotional appeal.<sup>7</sup> The researchers also used a control video, which was similar in length and did not discuss organ donation or transplantation.



*Brendan Marrocco (above) is a Veteran and VCA recipient. This graphic and others like it are available to download in HRSA’s [Outreach Materials Library](#).*

The data revealed that Veterans who viewed the organ donation videos were more willing to be organ donors after death. There was a 133% increase in willingness to be a traditional organ donor and an 86% increase in willingness to be a VCA donor. Furthermore, by providing an opportunity to click through to an organ donor registry, the study collected 51 new donor registrations. There was no significant difference in willingness to be a traditional organ donor between the Veteran-specific and

non-specific video groups, but only the Veteran-specific videos increased willingness to be a VCA donor.<sup>8</sup>

Dr. Rodrigue explained that the increase in support for traditional organ donation across all three videos proves that “you may not need to have a Veteran narrator, or even feature Veterans, to increase general donor willingness among Veterans. It’s most important to include testimonials with the information.” Research has already shown that

<sup>6</sup> Rodrigue, James. “A Randomized Trial to Increase Donor Registration and VCA Donation Willingness in Veterans.” 2023, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Participants had a median age of 51 years (range 25 to 70) and were 79% male and 53% non-Hispanic white (24% black, 14% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 4% other).

<sup>8</sup> Rodrigue, James. “A Randomized Trial to Increase Donor Registration and VCA Donation Willingness in Veterans.” 2023, pp. 18–21.

stories from people who have personal experience with organ donation and transplantation increases favorable opinions about traditional organ donation.<sup>9, 10</sup>

Dr. Rodrigue’s research illustrates that VCA messaging should be Veteran-specific to increase support for VCA among Veterans not yet registered as donors. Also, “mentioning VCA when talking about organ, eye, and tissue donation does not lessen the effectiveness of traditional organ donation messaging,” said Dr. Rodrigue. In other words, incorporating VCA messaging did not adversely impact the effectiveness of traditional donation messaging.

### Collaboration is Key

The importance of collaboration among organ donation experts and Veterans-services providers cannot be overstated. Dr. Rodrigue states that “Veterans should enroll in both the Department of Defense (DoD) registry and a state or national registry to guarantee their organ donation wishes are recorded and known to all medical providers.” He recommends “a more coordinated effort to partner with the DoD, state and federal Veterans agencies, and non-profit Veterans advocacy organizations to deliver video-based education to Veterans nationwide.”<sup>11</sup> Dr. Rodrigue’s research shows that coordinated outreach and education among Veterans is an effective way of increasing willingness to sign up and become organ, eye, and tissue donors for men over the age of 50.

Learn more and share information about VCA donation using this [video](#) and other [resources from HRSA](#).



### Strategies that work:

- **Get personal.** Include testimonials about organ donation to show the lifechanging benefits of organ and VCA donations.
- **Build partnerships.** Work with specialized organizations to reach underrepresented donor populations.
- **Don’t assume; ask!** Before you develop messaging, conduct focus groups with the target audience.

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This publication lists non-federal resources in order to provide additional information to consumers. The views and content in these resources have not been formally approved by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

<sup>9</sup> See Rodrigue *et al.*, “Increasing Organ Donor Designation Rates in Adolescents: A Cluster Randomized Trial.” <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6687249/>

<sup>10</sup> To support the inclusion of stories in donor education and outreach, HRSA provides [life stories](#) about donor heroes and recipients.

<sup>11</sup> Rodrigue, James. “A Randomized Trial to Increase Donor Registration and VCA Donation Willingness in Veterans.” 2023, p. 25.

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