

Today's hearing is an opportunity to examine the national organ procurement system and provide oversight into the implementation of the Securing the U.S. Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network Act.

The current state of organ transplantation in our country is inadequate and must be addressed.

There are over 100,000 individuals waiting for an organ transplant and about 17 people die each day waiting for one.

Notwithstanding the need for viable organs, according to one study, there are more than 28,000 viable organs that are not recovered each year. We must do better.

In 1984, the National Organ Transplant Act was signed into law that created a national framework for organ transplants. The bill established the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network, or OPTN, which created a public-private partnership that implements and oversees the organ donation and transplant system.

Currently, the sole contractor responsible for operating the OPTN is the United Network for Organ Sharing, or UNOS. They have been the sole contractor since 1986. During the past 38 years, there have been a myriad of issues plaguing this organ transplant system.

While UNOS has provided beneficial services to organ transplant patients, there have been many examples of them operating inefficiently.

I believe this is largely due to them having a monopoly.

Also, there are questions around potential conflicts of interest. For example, partially due to certain agency regulations, some members of the UNOS board also sit on the board of the OPTN.

And let me remind you, this is the oversight organization overseeing the organ transplant system.

According to a Senate Finance Committee report, between 2010 and 2020, more than 1,100 complaints were filed by patients, families, transplant centers and others regarding the organ transplant system.

These inefficiencies are due to the lack of oversight and management of Organ Procurement Organizations, or OPOs. OPO's are responsible for the procurement of organs for transplantation and are overseen by UNOS.

There have been many reported cases of transportation failures which has led to organs being unviable or having to cancel transplant procedures.

In 2018, there was a human heart left behind on a commercial plane.

Another mindboggling story was in 2020 when a kidney was accidentally thrown in the trash by an OPO staff, causing it to be unusable.

There are currently 56 OPO's operating in the US. The current system we have in place is a patchwork of OPO's that must rely on commercial couriers and airlines to transfer the organ.

If we can track our Amazon order for socks every step of the way, we should be able to track something as valuable as human organs. The lack of accountability must be addressed to create a more stable and reliable system.

There are other failures that show there needs to be an overhaul of how the organ transplant system operates.

That is what spurred H.R. 2544, the Securing the U.S. Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network Act, led by Energy and Commerce members Dr. Bucshon and Mrs. Kelly, that was signed into law in 2023 and was unanimously passed by this committee and both the House and Senate.

This bill allows for multiple entities to bid for certain contracts for functions such as logistics and health IT within the organ transplant network.

This allows for companies with expertise in certain areas to competitively bid for contracts and end UNOS' monopoly over the organ transplant process.

The bill also ensures accountability by having separate boards within the transplant system.

Within Health and Human Services is the Health Resources and Services Administration, or HRSA (her-sa), which houses the entire organ transplant system. They will now have the authority to modernize the organ transplant system.

It is Congress' job to ensure that HRSA successfully implements this law so that the previous failures do not happen.

Proper implementation is vital to saving lives.

On top of modernizing the organ transplant system, HHS and Congress must be open to approving new and innovative solutions to help address the organ shortage we are facing.

For example, in my district alone we have a company that develops genetically modified organs from pigs that can be transplanted into humans.

And, Virginia Tech has partnered with a doctor in my district to develop an innovative technology that can resuscitate and keep organs viable for longer periods of time from trauma patients.

I am hopeful that we are moving in the right direction to help mitigate the failures of our current organ transplant system, but more must be done.

Congress will be watching to ensure this new law is implemented effectively and we do not face the same mistakes again.