



**HUMAN
ORGAN
FOR TRANSPLANT**

GIVING IS THE BEST PART

As letter carrier **Martha Olsen** was scrolling through her Facebook feed one day in early 2018, something caught her eye.

One of the Jackson, MI Branch 232 member's friends had shared a social media post that was an appeal for a man needing a kidney.

Olsen didn't know the man—Dan Greenshields—but she was intrigued

about the prospect of organ donation.

The carrier reached out to Greenshields's wife, Rachel, who had been advocating for him, and found out that Greenshields suffered from IgA nephropathy, a degenerative kidney disease. Also known as Berger's disease, it occurs when an antibody called immunoglobulin A (IgA) builds up in the kidneys. This results in local

inflammation that eventually can hinder the kidneys' ability to filter waste from blood.

Olsen soon met and bonded with the man. The Greenshieldses had three daughters and a son, and Olsen and her husband do, too. She decided in spring 2018 that she wanted to start the process of donating her kidney.

Although most people have two kid-

LETTER CARRIERS' RIGHTS WHEN DONATING ORGANS

The rights granted to employees who donate an organ are found in various Postal Service handbooks and manuals, the National Agreement and the provisions of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993. While some of these rights may also be available to organ donation recipients, the sources cited in this article pertain to the person making the donation.

LEAVE

Career employees are entitled to administrative leave (ADML) when making an organ donation. The rules governing the entitlement for this leave are found in Section 519.521 of the *Employee and Labor Relations Manual*

(ELM). Administrative Leave for organ donation is not available to non-career employees, including city carrier assistants (CCA).

The amount of ADML a career employee may be granted depends on whether they are full or part time and the type of donation. Full-time employees who donate an organ are entitled to a maximum of 14 days of ADML per leave year, while part-time employees are granted up to seven days. The rules governing the amount of ADML entitlements are found in Section 519.522 of the ELM.

Should a career employee need to be absent longer than the amount of ADML allowed according to this provision, the additional time may be

charged as sick leave (SL), annual leave (AL) or leave without pay (LWOP). An employee with an insufficient SL balance may substitute AL or LWOP for the absence. Sections 513.61 and 513.62 of the ELM and Article 10.5.B of the National Agreement address situations where an employee has an insufficient SL balance. Because CCAs do not earn SL, leave taken for organ donation would be charged as either AL or LWOP.

To avoid using LWOP while absent due to organ donation, employees have two options to prevent a loss of pay:

- Career employees may request up to 240 hours of advanced sick leave (ASL) in accordance with the provisions of Section

Martha Olsen (r) was in the hospital when Dan Greenshields received his new kidney.



neys, the National Kidney Foundation says people with just one kidney can live normal, healthy lives.

The donation process is “kind of an emotional roller coaster,” Olsen said. “The criteria to be a donor, you have to go through a lot of testing.”

The extensive testing to make sure that she was a good donor had four steps. First, doctors took a vial of blood to determine her blood type. Then, there was a tissue type test, which is a blood test that matches the number of antigens the donor and recipient share.

Next was a full day of testing, which can be six to seven hours. It’s “really intense,” Olsen said. During that time, doctors took 18 vials of blood, and she had a heart and lung X-ray and a CAT scan. She also underwent a psychological evaluation. “They test you for everything,” she said.

Once she passed all of those steps, she underwent a global filtration rate test, which Olsen described as another full day. During this process, doctors see how well the kidney functions, and gauge expectations. The carrier said this step included drinking 8 ounces of

water and urinating in a cup, over and over, as well as more blood draws.

After she went through her testing in July 2018, doctors ended up telling her, “You’re an excellent donor, but not a perfect match for Dan.” Because of this, she was told about a paired kidney exchange program. These programs, also known as kidney swaps, are used when a living kidney donor who is incompatible with the intended recipient instead exchanges kidneys with another donor/recipient pair.

Olsen agreed to enter the program, because, she said, “Otherwise, he wouldn’t get one.”

A new match was found for Olsen in December, and the surgery was scheduled for February of this year, but it fell

through for some reason—the carrier was never told why.

Things soon were looking up, though: She was matched with a patient at Baylor University Medical Center in Texas in need of a kidney, and a man associated with the patient in Texas was matched with Greenshields as a part of the kidney

513.511 of the *ELM*. Should the request be denied, the employee should contact their local union representative to determine if a grievance needs to be filed.

- Both career and non-career employees may request donated leave through the Annual Leave Sharing program. This program allows employees to donate AL to another employee who has an insufficient leave balance to cover an anticipated absence of at least 40 hours more than their own AL and/or SL balance will cover. The rules governing this program are found in Section 512.64 of the *ELM*; in Management Instruction EL-510-2003-2, Annual Leave Sharing Program; and in the Memorandum of

Understanding (MOU) Re: Leave Sharing. The leave-sharing MOU is found on pages 176 and 177 of the 2016-2019 National Agreement. While the language in the *ELM* states that this program is available to transitional employees, the language in the National Agreement affirms the parties’ intent to include CCAs as well.

FMLA

Eligible employees who donate an organ may be entitled to have absences related to the donation protected under the FMLA. On Aug. 28, 2018, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) issued an opinion letter, FMLA 2018-2-A, affirming this position. A copy of

this opinion letter is available on the DOL website at dol.gov/whd/opinion/FMLA/2018/2018_08_28_2A_FMLA.pdf. Information regarding FMLA is available on the NALC website at nalc.org/fmla.

The National Agreement and USPS handbooks, manuals and management instructions may be found on the NALC website under the Resources Main Page of the “Workplace Issues” section at nalc.org/workplace-issues/resources. Letter carriers who have further questions regarding organ donation should contact their local union representatives or, if necessary, their NALC national business agent (NBA). Contact information for the NBA who covers your region can be found on the NALC website at nalc.org/regions. PR



exchange program.

Olsen and Greenshields's surgeries were both scheduled for April 25 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. They even had the same surgeon.

Olsen's donated kidney "was flown to Texas," she said, while Greenshields's donor's kidney was flown north from the Lone Star State.

The carrier doesn't actually know who received her kidney. The recipient still is totally anonymous—she doesn't know the age, gender or any other identifying information. She heard only that the surgery was a success.

Olsen could write and send a letter through the program coordinator, and see if the person decides to respond. "It's something I might like to do," she said.

For now, she regards Greenshields as her recipient. "I'm so happy that Dan is doing so well," Olsen said, adding that it would be depressing if she had found out soon after that her recipient wasn't doing well after the transplant.

People often say to the carrier, "So where's your kidney?" She explains the whole paired kidney program and its sometimes confusing logistics. "It's becoming more common," she says.

So why did Olsen decide to donate? "It was kind of one of those perfect circumstances," she said. The carrier explained that she is in her 50s, in excellent health, and her kids are grown.

"I knew I'd be physically able," the marathon runner added.

She also knew she could take advantage of the Postal Service's program to have extra time off to recover without a financial hardship (see sidebar). USPS allowed her 14 days of leave to recover; since then, she has used her sick leave to recuperate further. Olsen said she had accrued a lot of sick leave hours during her 19 years with the Postal Service, so she has not been stressed.

Olsen said it's been a slow but pro-

ductive recovery. "The first three to four days are tough because of immobility," she said. "Otherwise, I feel great." She wanted to be adequately recovered for her daughter's wedding in late May, so that added extra incentive.

At the time of this interview in mid-May, she explained that she would need a bit more recovery time, as she couldn't yet lift the required amount to be back on full-time letter carrier duty, but she's been working hard to stay active. Olsen has been walking five to six miles each day and looks forward to running again.

The carrier said she now needs to be more aware of her water intake and the medications she takes, but besides that, the aftermath of her donation "hasn't been a huge lifestyle change."

Olsen also has received an outpouring of positive reaction from co-workers. "It's just been so amazing," she said. "They had a party for me before my surgery. They've been nothing but supportive. I work with a lot of wonderful people."

The carrier has continued her friendship with Greenshields, and they have gotten together, along with their spouses, on occasion, including for Greenshields's son's recent graduation party. The two also are planning to complete a kidney walk—a fundraiser that raises awareness about the prevention of kidney disease and the need for organ donation—together in the fall.

Olsen hopes that others will consider living organ donations. "I encourage people to research it before getting involved," she said, adding that donating is "wrapping your head around consenting to have surgery when you're a healthy human being. You have to be willing to jump through a lot of hoops."

Living donation surgery involves the same level of risk to the donor as any other major surgery. While there is not

much data on the long-term effects of organ donation, overall risks are considered to be low. And, according to the American Kidney Fund, kidneys from living donors can sometimes last almost twice as long as kidneys from deceased donors.

There are many ways to get started. You might know about someone who needs a kidney or other organ, or you could contact a local hospital.

Olsen explained that the concept of an "altruistic donor," who donates to a stranger without having a friend or relative in need of a transplant, is growing in popularity. "They can start a chain of people," she said. "There's one now where 60 people have gotten a kidney. It all started with one man who donated altruistically."

The carrier also mentioned that laws that vary by state can offer some benefits. "Different states have different laws that are generous," she said. Some give tax deductions—though not currently in her home state of Michigan. Federal legislation regarding this has not yet been passed. Pending legislation in another state includes the stipulation that relatives of living donors would go straight to the top of the transplant list if they needed an organ someday, Olsen said. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services maintains a web page with information regarding state laws in support of living donation at organdonor.gov.

Above all, she has no regrets about her decision, saying that her experience was both "exciting and nerve-wracking."

"It's worth giving it a try and knowing what you're getting into," Olsen said. "There are a lot of variables. You have to be ready for all of the possibilities if you're going to do it."

All in all, she said, "It makes you feel pretty good about yourself." **PR**