

Where the Mission Lives: OPO Leaders and Staff Share Insights on Organ Donation Operations, Challenges, and the Path to Better Measures

Conversations on the ground with organ procurement organizations (OPO) leadership and frontline staff bring into focus the realities, barriers, and innovations that drive the organ donation landscape—offering a practical foundation for performance measures that reflect how this lifesaving work actually gets done.



Background

The Association of Organ Procurement Organizations (AOPO) leads the nation's organ donation community with a clear mission: save more lives. Central to that mission is a commitment to continuous improvement—advancing donation and transplantation practices, collaborating with stakeholders, and sharing best practices across its network of organ procurement organization (OPO) members.

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In March 2025, AOPO partnered with Econometrica to launch the OPO Performance Measurement project, bringing together 53 OPOs to develop independently validated, data-driven metrics that promote transparency, trust, and system-wide quality improvement.

Challenge

Developing performance measures that accurately reflect OPO work requires more than policy review or data analysis. Current metrics do not fully capture what OPOs actually do—or the complex web of regulatory requirements, hospital relationships, geographic constraints, variation in donor potential, and clinical decisions that shape their outcomes. To build measures that are fair, meaningful, and improvement oriented, direct insight from the people doing the work is necessary.

Approach

Econometrica, on behalf of AOPO, conducted in-person and virtual site visits with seven active OPOs across the United States. Selected to represent diverse geographies, organization types, and performance tiers, these OPOs opened their doors—and their processes—to a rigorous examination.

Across 45 total interviews, Econometrica engaged OPO executive teams, department directors, managers, and frontline staff through leadership meetings, key informant interviews, and focus groups.

Five topic areas guided the conversations:

- ▶ **OPO Operations and Processes**—How OPOs are organized, staffed, and trained to carry out donation activities.
- ▶ **Challenges and Barriers**—Regulatory complexity, hospital access, geography, and Donation after Circulatory Death (DCD)-specific obstacles.
- ▶ **Successes and Process Improvement**—Clinical best practices, stakeholder engagement, and data-driven innovation.
- ▶ **Data Sources and Current Measures**—How OPOs track performance internally and where current metrics fall short.
- ▶ **Considerations for New Measures**—OPO perspectives on what should be measured, standardized, and reported.

What They Told Us



What's Working:

Mission-driven culture, dedicated specialized teams, continuous quality improvement, and growing use of data dashboards and analytics to drive performance.

What Needs to Change:

Measures that capture OPO effort—not just outcomes. Standardized definitions. Better hospital accountability. And risk-adjusted metrics that reflect the populations OPOs serve.

- Despite differences in geography, size, and performance tier, OPOs had far more in common than not. All seven described themselves as mission-driven organizations deeply committed to donors, donor families, and saving lives. Frontline staff were highly specialized, data oriented, and proud of their work—even as they navigated a system with significant structural friction.
- The most consistent message: Current performance measures do not fully capture the breadth and complexity of OPO responsibilities. OPO outcomes are shaped by multiple stakeholders across the donation and transplant continuum, but existing measures do not capture shared responsibilities across hospitals, OPOs, and transplant centers. In addition, limitations in risk adjustment, variability in data definitions, and the current tiering approach can unintentionally discourage collaboration in a system that depends on coordinated action.

Recommendations

OPOs offered specific, actionable recommendations: measure authorization conversations, not just rates; capture allocation effort regardless of outcome; account for geographic and logistical constraints; and standardize clinical definitions across the field. Several OPOs called for a national data dictionary and consensus-based clinical standards to enable meaningful, equitable comparisons.

Above all, OPOs urged that the people closest to the work—donors, families, staff, and partners—be at the center of any effort to redesign how performance is defined and measured.

Key Takeaway

The insights shared by OPO leaders and frontline staff underscore that a more accurate, equitable, and improvement-oriented performance measurement system is both urgently needed and entirely within reach. Their experiences highlight the gap between what current metrics capture and what OPOs actually do—relationship building, clinical complexity, geographic and logistical barriers, and relentless commitment to saving lives. Closing that gap requires measures developed in partnership with the people doing the work, grounded in standardized definitions, and designed to drive collaboration across the entire transplant ecosystem rather than competition within it.

Ultimately, better measures drive better outcomes—and better outcomes mean more people get off the waiting list and get the organ they need.

Why Measurements Matter: A Frontline Perspective

Click the image to play this audiogram.

Why OPOs Matter

Erin Smith
Cascade Life Alliance

For more information about this project please visit:
<http://www.aopo.org/opo-metrics-project/>.