

Congress considers easing regulations on air transport of donated organs

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

What do kidney and pancreas transplants have to do with airplane regulations?

Tucked into the hundreds of pages of legislative language to reauthorize

the Federal Aviation Administration is a provision to change the life-or-death process by which [human organs](#) are flown commercially from donor to recipient.

But where on the plane organs are stowed during flights has been a long-standing issue for organ procurement organizations.

The sweeping measure, which is pending in Congress and faces a Sept. 30 deadline, aims to change regulations and move organs to the cabin from an aircraft's cargo hold. Organizations managing organ transport consider it an opportunity to secure legislative relief from a system they say adds more hurdles to the task of shipping organs.

It used to be that a member of a transplant team could take a packaged organ to a plane's gate and hand it off to the aircraft's crew, who would stow it in the cockpit or on the flight deck. This access "allowed us to really expedite the process," said Jeff Orłowski, president and CEO of LifeShare Oklahoma, a nonprofit organ procurement organization in the state. But the [terrorist attacks](#) of 9/11 led to tighter security protocols, including a rule that permitted only people with tickets to go through Transportation Security Administration checkpoints.

"In our case, we don't have a ticket," said Casey Humphries, logistics service line leader of the United Network for Organ Sharing, the nonprofit contracted by the federal government to manage the nation's transplant system. "We're not booked as a passenger on a plane," she said. Instead, they're part of the relay network bringing the organs to people in need. Airport employees who work behind security checkpoints have an airport badge and usually get in through a designated entrance.

Another consequence of the 2001 policy changes was that donor organs flown on commercial airplanes—which are mostly kidneys—were

stashed in cargo spaces below the wing along with boxes and luggage, said Humphries.

But shipping organs as cargo requires they be at the airport for loading one to two hours before takeoff. "That's a significant time before the wheels go up for the plane," said Orlowski. And that variable—the "hours that the organ is going to just sit, going nowhere"—has to be factored into decisions about where it can be sent, he said. Donated organs can't be treated like a golf bag or an Amazon box. They are delicate and have an imminent expiration date, which for kidneys is usually within 24 hours of surgical removal.

Since January 2022, around 80% of organs recovered in Oklahoma were sent to another state to be transplanted, Orlowski said. And of the organs LifeShare recovers, about 35% of them are flown commercially. Since kidneys can survive in a cooler longer than other organs, nearly all organs that travel on commercial flights are kidneys.

The first choice for transporting an organ, he said, is usually to drive it to its destination; it's cheaper, and the transplant team can be more watchful.

But that's not always an option, especially in rural areas. Orlowski said there are only two transplant centers within driving distance of LifeShare's Oklahoma City base, in Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas. So his team relies on commercial airlines for transportation.

The current air travel security rules also cause geographic disparities, as fewer cargo-carrying planes fly in and out of smaller airports in rural areas, compared with airports in bigger cities.

"We need something that is available 24 hours a day because organs are available 24 hours a day," Humphries said.

Charter planes can be a backup option, but one flight can cost organ procurement organizations thousands of dollars, whereas cargo shipping costs usually come in at less than \$500 per flight, Orlowski said.

Although the security protocol has been in place for more than two decades, transplant advocates say this is the first time they have sought a legislative reversal, and they are optimistic about the outcome.

The provision to allow organs back in cabins is included in both the Senate and House versions of the reauthorization bill. Some hot-button parts of the bill, though, such as an increase in the mandatory retirement age for pilots, could stall progress. The House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee approved its version on June 14, and at press time it was being debated on the House floor. The Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation is expected to consider its version this month, according to Senate staffers.

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