



# Saving Lives and Making an Impact: Donor Alliance's Quest for Excellence

by Sue Dunn  
President and CEO, Donor Alliance

Each day at Donor Alliance we are responsible for saving lives in Colorado and Wyoming through the power of donation and transplantation. Members of our community depend on our work during some of the most vulnerable times in their lives. Those waiting for a transplant rely on our processes to get a second chance at life, while the families of donors also lean on us to honor their loved one's heroic decision to become a donor. The simple, yet powerful mission to meet those needs is at the foundation of our culture.

Being awarded the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in 2018 was the culmination of a near decade-long performance excellence journey for our organization. Our Baldrige journey began in 2010 with the goal of improving Donor Alliance's overall effectiveness in maximizing donation and transplantation. At first glance, the framework seemed straightforward. However, we quickly realized it was deceptively simple. The Baldrige Criteria categories identify key areas of organizational focus and call for an assessment of your own identified processes. Our "ah-ha" moment came when we tried aligning our strategic planning process (SPP) with the Baldrige Criteria. Our work and diligence paid off as nine years

later, when we received the award, it was our SPP that was identified as a key theme and a bolded strength.

We found it useful to have a proven methodology for improvement. Identifying our core competencies, strategic advantages, and strategic challenges informed our improvement efforts. Establishing key objectives followed and included achieving mission impact, sustaining a high engagement culture, delivering the "Donor Alliance" experience, and maintaining financial sustainability. Focusing on these objectives and keeping them top of mind during planning and decision-making helped guide us along our journey.

## Achieving Mission Impact

Using the Baldrige Excellence Framework, we were able to implement a number of innovative processes that helped us achieve incredible results. During the last five years of our Baldrige journey, we steadily increased the number of organ transplants by 45 percent, directly translating to more lives saved and healed through transplantation. In 2018 alone, a record 489 people were removed from the waiting list for a lifesaving organ transplant in Colorado—and tens of thousands of people have been or will be healed by the tissue donations recovered in our region.

We have consistently ranked as one of the top ten organ procurement organizations in the nation due to our high organ donor conversion rate of more than 80 percent. Also, consistently outperforming the top 10 percent of organ procurement organizations in the percentage of donors who have registered themselves to be donors, our organization far surpasses the national averages.

## Sustaining a High Engagement Culture

People make our lifesaving work possible. We work continually to engage and nurture relationships with the families of donors, our staff and partners, truly



*The Baldrige Award Ceremony is a celebration of excellence. Here Sue Dunn, President and CEO of Donor Alliance, speaks to the audience about how the Donor Alliance leverages the Baldrige Excellence Framework to save lives through maximizing donor services.*

putting people first. Through our Baldrige experience, and grounded by our core competencies—building strong relationships and being a mission-driven organization—we have cultivated a culture of consistent communication and feedback, which was key in helping us achieve our goals.

Much of our success is attributed to the energy and resources we have put into a variety of communication mechanisms, creating a sense of involvement and confidence with our workforce, customers, and other stakeholders. While the early years are tough in getting Baldrige integrated throughout the organization, there is a point when it becomes how you do your work, and that is a wonderful thing!

### Delivering the “Donor Alliance” Experience

We are one of 58 independent organ procurement organizations across the United States. Our service area stretches across more than 180,000 square miles and includes more than 5.8 million residents and 110 hospitals. To best serve our region by maximizing each donation opportunity, we use 20 different approaches to listen to, interact with, and observe partners. Our methods include satisfaction surveys, in-person and video interviews, meetings, scorecards, follow-up reporting, and a leadership liaison assigned to each of our local transplant centers and key tissue processors (the organizations that prepare, preserve, store, and distribute tissue grafts for transplantation).

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Ongoing, real-time communication is key and occurs daily among clinical staff and partners throughout our organ and tissue work system processes. These processes and level of communication have helped us achieve a 100 percent satisfaction rate with both our key tissue processors and all four of our local transplant centers.

Of course, our work would not be possible without the heroes that have made the selfless decision to



*Donor Alliance President and CEO Sue Dunn presents Bob Fangmeyer, Director of the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program with a large piece of Donate Life art to decorate the Program’s offices.*

register as donors. Part of the lifesaving work that we do also includes sharing the stories of those donors, their families, and recipients in order to educate and inspire the community. We create and support local partnerships, events, public outreach, and education campaigns throughout our region to encourage more people to register as organ and tissue donors.

### A Commitment to Sustained Excellence

Throughout my career, which has now spanned more than three decades, I have always been passionate about organ and tissue donation. However, seeing our team embrace the Baldrige process and be able to celebrate the nearly immediate positive impact on not only the way we work, but the incredible results of that work, continues to provide inspiration.

We are so proud to have met our key objectives and positively contribute to our mission to save lives through organ and tissue donation and transplantation. Achieving that mission is far too critical for us not to be fully committed to having and maintaining systematic processes that enable a meaningful legacy to be created for the families of organ and tissue donors, while also giving recipients of organ and tissue donations a second chance at life.

We are honored to have been recognized for this achievement, but we will continue to be dedicated to continuous improvement as an organization because our work saves the lives of thousands of people in our community and across the country.