

2026 OPTN Board Officer Election Interest, Biographical, and Personal Statements

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Secretary

Kymerly D. Watt, MD

Medical Director of Living Donor Liver Transplant Program, Mayo Clinic College of Medicine and Science, and Professor of Medicine, Mayo Clinic

Interest Statement. I am dedicated to the field of transplantation. We have a unique opportunity in these months and years to come to truly modernize the OPTN and improve patient access while maintaining patient safety, optimize donor care, and improve process and functionality of the system. I believe we have the people and support for change. As Secretary of the OPTN Board of Directors, I can and will serve the community to the best of my ability.

Biographical Statement. I am passionate about this opportunity to serve on the OPTN Board of Directors in an officer position. The coming years will see tremendous change in health care delivery and we in transplantation need to be leading and guiding this change. This requires a strong, diverse team and a united front. I am a strong team player with a deep understanding of the multiple layers of transplantation. Helping everyone on both sides of the donation/transplantation journey drives the desire to do this better, easier, and ubiquitously.

I am a full-time clinician with 20+ years of experience in transplant hepatology. I perform long-term outcomes research in all solid organ transplantation, with a goal to improve survival for all transplant recipients. As a medical director of liver transplantation institutionally, I have chaired societal committees and established a donor driven educational collaborative (“Liver Givers”). At every professional and personal level, I believe in equity and inclusion. I am committed to improving access to transplant for all patients. I serve on the council for the International Liver Transplant Society (ILTS), with deep connections globally that provide considerable insight into global organ donation and allocation systems from which we can learn. My tenure through two committee appointments on the OPTN Liver and Intestinal Organ Transplantation Committee fostered an intense desire to be more integrally involved in policy development. To contribute at this level to the OPTN Modernization provides no greater opportunity to have a lasting impact on transplantation in the U.S. I will work hard for this Board and for the transplant community.

Personal Statement. Since the Industrial Revolution, companies have adopted task-specific specialization and collaborative practice to increase productivity and achieve common goals, while at the same time fostering employee engagement. Knowledge-sharing drives efficiency and productivity. I see the goals of the OPTN Modernization Initiative as an opportunity to facilitate specialization and collaboration to fundamentally change and improve organ transplantation across the country. We must ensure all patients in need of organ transplant have access to an organ transplant while maximally optimizing that patient’s safety. We must foster a strong collaborative environment to achieve these goals.

I am a Professor of Medicine and transplant hepatologist in a busy transplant center at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN, that provides both deceased and live donor liver transplant. I have served as medical director of transplant, the live donor program director, and a member of the transplant executive

council at Mayo Clinic. I am deeply involved and held multiple leadership roles within transplant and hepatology societies such as ILTS, the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases (AASLD), and the American Society of Transplantation (AST). My academic career is focused on improving long-term outcomes in the transplant recipient. I have published and spoken extensively in these areas. I am a strong advocate for transplantation on both recipient and donor side of the equation. I completed my second appointment on the OPTN Liver and Intestinal Organ Transplantation Committee, contributing to the development and change of policy relating to liver transplantation in the U.S. The experience has instilled a passion in me to be more involved in policy development and work on the mechanics of the transplant process nationally for all potential transplant recipients and donors. There are many things that can be done to increase organ donation, improve access to organ transplantation, and ensure timely transplantation to all patients in need. I am excited for the opportunity to contribute to these much-needed changes.

The mission of the OPTN has a far-reaching impact on innumerable lives. Unique to transplantation is the balance between the patient in organ failure and the donor. We serve them all. Also unique to transplantation is the level of individual commitment and engagement from multidisciplinary team members on both sides of transplantation. Change is overdue for many components of our transplant system, while other aspects need to be preserved. Together, we can strengthen the mission while innovating and improving transplant practice to move the transplant community forward. This mission is best served with a strong, dedicated team-based effort that unites the transplant community together, and I believe I have the skillset to bring people together and help move these initiatives forward.

I believe the future of transplantation is very bright and extremely exciting. I am dedicated to help both the OPTN and the field of transplantation advance and prosper into the next era. I would embrace the role on the OPTN Board, making building a stronger, unified transplant network a priority goal.

Justin Wilkerson, MBA

Retired Military Officer, Illinois Army National Guard, Liver Transplant Recipient

Interest Statement. Justin Wilkerson serves as Board Secretary and remains committed to advancing the initiatives of the OPTN to improve patient outcomes through sound policy. Throughout his tenure, Justin has contributed to several key projects, including Allocation Out of OPTN Sequence, and has maintained an active engagement in the OPTN's work. In addition to his responsibilities as Secretary, Justin serves on both the Executive Committee and the Finance Committee. He also makes a concerted effort to attend Membership and Professional Standards Committee (MPSC), the Disease Transmission Advisory Committee (DTAC), and other committee and workgroup meetings whenever possible. Beyond committee work, Justin prioritizes direct engagement with patients, transplant centers, and OPOs to better understand their perspectives and concerns. These interactions have helped shape his work as Secretary. He remains dedicated to continuing his service with the OPTN in any capacity that can contribute to improving patient transplant opportunities and outcomes.

Biographical Statement. Justin Wilkerson recently retired from the military, where he served as an officer in the Illinois Army National Guard in various staff and leadership roles for 32 years. He resides in Peoria, IL, with his wife and living liver donor, Mary, and their three boys. He is an active member of

many advocacy organizations including the OPTN, Mended Hearts, Scouts of America, the Veterans of Foreign War, the American Legion, Military Officers Association of America, and the Military Police Regimental Association. Justin serves as a board director on the OPTN and on his local Military Officers Association of America chapter. He also is a member of several transplant patient support groups.

Justin's transplant journey began in 2012, when he was diagnosed with primary sclerosing cholangitis. On August 17, 2021, his wife, Mary, donated her liver to save his life. While they recovered in the hospital, he decided to make it his mission to give back to the transplant community. He wanted to promote organ donation—both living and deceased.

Justin had a passion to understand why some patients died on the waitlist. This curiosity led him to a regional representative position on the OPTN Patient Affairs Committee in 2021, where he was able to use his experience managing organizations, developing policy, and communicating strategy to help the OPTN and the Patient Affairs Committee. Justin developed a deep understanding of the U.S. transplantation system and will continue serving the patient community using that knowledge along with his skills and experience to improve outcomes.

As former military officer, Justin served in various senior positions of leadership to include on-the-ground command during the civil unrest in Chicago in 2020. He served in organizations where he spearheaded organizational change, organizational culture, strategic development, and executive communications. He has extensive policy development and process improvement experience. He worked in locations throughout the world including, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Republic of Poland, the Republic of Korea, and the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Personal Statement. My request is that you vote for those who will represent the long-term interests of patients best—those who possess the will, the energy, the intellect, and the finesse to effectively implement the Modernization initiatives.

My service on the Patient Affairs Committee has been influenced by two factors: my personal transplant experience and my military service. I see an appointment on the Board as the philosophical equivalent to a military command assignment: if done well, it should be both a privilege and a burden—the privilege is the trust given to lead and be an advocate for our most precious resource, the men and women in service (our patients); the burden is the commitment of time needed to effectively execute a command combined with the stress of weighing options to make difficult decisions (implementing Modernization and developing policy). Should you select me, I will approach the Board duties with that position in mind.

My transplant journey began in 2012, when I was diagnosed with primary sclerosing cholangitis. On August 17, 2021, my hero, my wife Mary, donated her liver to me. While we recovered in the hospital, I decided to make it my mission to give back to the transplant community. I understood that my access to medical resources and support networks, both at home and at work, was atypical. I wanted to help those less fortunate gain access to the resources that I had, and I wanted to promote organ donation—both living and deceased.

Having been on the Patient Affairs Committee for over three years, I have watched the OPTN go through fundamental change and am excited at the opportunity that Modernization brings. I have been a strong

contributor on the Patient Affairs Committee. I have been a voice for the patient community and have been noted for my policy analysis, my written communication, and for my collaboration with Patient Affairs Committee members, patients, OPOs, and transplant centers. I am fascinated by all of their experiences and perspectives and seek to hear their concerns and to synthesize all of this information into my approach on the Patient Affairs Committee. If selected, I will do the same on the Board.

As an officer in the military, I have served in senior positions of leadership for the past eight years to include on-the-ground command during the civil unrest in Chicago in 2020. I have served in organizations where I spearheaded organizational change, organizational culture, strategic development, and executive communications. I have extensive policy development and process improvement experience. Should you select me for a Board position, I will bring all of my skills and experiences to bear in driving improvements for transplant patients. I will be personally accountable to represent all patients, donors, and their families in the work we do. Before the Board, my message will be focused and strong in representing the best interests of transplant patients across our nation. We need a Board that can execute the steps necessary to carry the OPTN through its most fundamental change since its formation in 1984.

Vice President of Patient and Donor Affairs

Jen Benson, BA

Chief Executive Officer and Founder of The Transplant Journey Inc. and The Transplant Collective, and Operations Manager, RLBenson & Associates; Pancreas and Kidney Transplant Recipient

Interest Statement. I bring my intellectual capital in transplant navigation, donor family advocacy, and patient education—skills cultivated through founding and leading my organization since March 2020. When patients face life-altering decisions, proper guidance is critical. I have pointed patients toward transplant centers better suited to their medical needs rather than allowing them to remain on dialysis unnecessarily. The outcome was faster access to transplantation and improved quality of life. One example is a patient who believed they were actively listed for a transplant simply because they had verbally informed their social worker while receiving dialysis. My intervention uncovered the oversight and corrected it before irreversible time was lost—a stark reminder that assumed communication can cost lives. Another situation was when two donor families experienced devastating loss and had nowhere to turn, they came to my organization. I provided guidance and connected them with proper resources during their most vulnerable moments, ensuring their loved ones’ legacy was honored with dignity. Since 2021, my efforts have helped facilitate 74 transplants. That is tangible evidence that my experience, advocacy, and commitment produce measurable, life-saving results, but with care.

Biographical Statement. Since graduating from Wheaton College in 2003, Jen has built a career that seamlessly blends operational skill set with mission-driven nonprofit leadership, creating meaningful impact in the transplant community.

From 2008 to 2020, Jen served as Assistant Operations Manager at RLBenson & Associates, where she honed her strengths in coordination, process improvement, and team leadership, with some time off in-between while fighting for her life awaiting a transplant. In 2020, she advanced to Operations Manager, continuing to drive efficiency, manage cross-functional teams, and implement strategic solutions.

That same year, Jen founded The Transplant Journey Inc., where she has since led powerful efforts in advocacy, education, and patient/family support. In November 2024, she expanded this vision by launching The Transplant Collective, an umbrella organization uniting 23 grassroots groups to collaborate in bridging the gap between living and deceased donation.

Through this collective model, Jen aims to reduce the waitlist while easing the burden on patients, families, and an increasingly strained medical community she has seen pushed to their limits.

Personal Statement. Each day I waited for my transplant, the very policies the OPTN Board created and enforced—not abstract guidelines, but life-determining realities that meant the difference between hope and despair for my family and others—have made it clear to me why it is an honor to serve on this Board. As I waited, I saw truths about our transplant ecosystem: protocol differences between centers can alter destinies. The ripple effect of transplant medicine extends far beyond the patient to entire support networks, and transparency, joined with shared resources, literally saves lives. These insights fueled my mission to bridge the gap between policy and practice. Transplant medicine extends far beyond the patient to entire support networks, and trust coupled together literally saves lives.

It has been an honor to serve on the OPTN Board and Executive Committee alongside the brilliant minds of the medical community, as well as patients and donor families who give this work its deepest meaning. During this time, it has deepened my commitment and sense of purpose. I now seek to bring the six years of experience running my organization—with over 34,000 members including pre-and post-transplant patients, donor families, and living donors—to the role of Vice President of Patient and Donor Family Affairs, serving as a dedicated voice for every corner of this community.

Too often, the very people this system exists to serve—patients—feel lost, confused, and frightened; they do not know where to turn. They grow frustrated. Their voices go unheard. Their questions go unanswered. I want to change that. I want to bring their concerns forward to the Officers, the Executive Committee, the Board, and members—ensuring that the lived realities of patients and families are never ignored and silenced from the decisions that shape their fates.

As a simultaneous pancreas-kidney recipient of nearly 11 years, I have witnessed firsthand both the extraordinary achievements and the persistent shortcomings of this system. I am filled with profound gratitude for the life I have been given because of it, and it is precisely that gratitude that compels me to speak honestly. There is always room for improvement. In conversations with countless members of this community, I have found that this belief is shared: we can celebrate every milestone this system has reached while still holding ourselves accountable to do better.

That means ensuring no organ is wasted. It means working tirelessly to reduce the waitlist. It means making certain that no one dies waiting who didn't have to, and that no one is shortchanged because of where they live, what they earn, or which center they happen to reach first. It means guaranteeing that every person who is sick and may qualify has fair and equal access to the waitlist.

William (Bill) Ryan, MBA

Founder, President, and Chief Executive Officer of Transplant Life Foundation; Family Member of a Deceased Donor

Interest Statement. I have a significant interest in contributing to the ongoing modernization of the donation and transplant system, and the body of work that we are confronting is daunting but manageable. The existing officers have worked together to set the stage for the future, and I feel I bring a high level of patient and donor family experience that will complement the efforts going forward.

Biographical Statement. Bill Ryan is President and Chief Executive Officer of The Transplant Life Foundation and is also board chair of Ryan Marketing Group Technologies, an event project management company with over 30 years of experience on world class events including the NCAA Final Four®, FINA World Swimming Championships, FIBA Men’s World Basketball Championships, World Cup Soccer, and the Solheim Cup. Bill leads a team of professionals in producing the Transplant Games of America, the largest gathering of transplant recipients and donor families in the world, and most recently has completed a six-year term on the advisory board for Gift of Life Michigan. Bill is a longstanding member of the Michigan Donor Family Council.

With a career-long professional background in voice, data, and broadcast technical experience, Bill has demonstrated leadership skills in managing complex, and diverse business disciplines including data management, large-scale experiential analysis, and oversight of media and marketing divisions.

As a donor parent, Bill has lost two daughters, which has propelled and maintained his involvement in the field of donation and transplantation. He has served the community for almost 40 years and welcomes the opportunity to serve on the OPTN Board.

Personal Statement. As Chief Executive Officer and President of the Transplant Life Foundation, I have had the pleasure of serving the donation and transplantation community for almost 40 years. Over this time, I have had the opportunity to touch the lives of hundreds of patients and their families through our advocacy efforts across the nation. The emotional interaction between living donors, donor families, and recipients demonstrates and proves the amazing success of this miracle of transplantation. At its very core, our mission must be to ensure that the experience for all parties continues to be a life enriching event.

As a parent, I was introduced to transplant in 1986, after losing my daughter, Michelle, in an automobile accident. It was her wish to become an organ donor, and her gifts made life possible for a number of patients. In 1999, our family lost a second daughter, Angie, to a life-long physical disability. These life events have given me the opportunity to transform painful losses into a meaningful mission to promote and encourage organ and tissue donation.

Over the course of my business career as an executive in multiple industries, I have the acumen and skill set to review, reflect, and participate in business decisions that further advance the amazing results to date and, at the same time, build a structure for the future to accommodate the growing need for additional organs.

Leading the Transplant Life Foundation and producing the Transplant Games of America, I have worked alongside thousands of participants across a broad demographic base. Interaction with these patients, caregivers, donors, donor families, and professionals has given me a clear understanding of the needs of this community.

I am excited at the potential of helping impact donation and transplantation rates in communities of color and using my decades of business leadership to help drive innovation and technology to improve end results. I look forward to continuing support of the transplant community and being a part of the OPTN team.