

Claudia Lennhoff: Closing Remarks 2018

I hope you enjoyed the Awards presentation and the SlideShow.

Every year, I close the Dinner with some reflections, and a look at the year ahead. Like Rep. Rodney Davis, I say some words.

But unlike Rep. Rodney Davis, I mean what I say.

Tonight, as I stand here, my overwhelming feeling is of gratitude and hope.

I am so moved by the work of all the individuals and organizations who received awards tonight. And I am moved by the work that the rest of you who are, but were not on stage tonight, do as well.

The work that you all do matters so much.

I want to talk about 2017, and I have to be honest with y'all.

I am still reeling from 2017.

It seemed like it was a year like no other. The attacks on the health insurance programs that we work with every single day, and that we see saving our clients' lives, were just unrelenting. They seemed to be never ending.

We fought against these attacks, and all the while, for months on end while we were doing this, our amazing staff – Adani, Chris, and Paulette – continued to provide services to about 500 clients each month. People from all walks of life.

I'm not reeling from the amount of work that it took for us to fight against these threats from Congress. I'm reeling from how far-reaching and vicious these legislative initiatives were, and from knowing what they would do to people.

2017 taught us two important lessons: 1) there are politicians who will stop at nothing to try to send our nation back to a time when health care was a privilege afforded only

to the well-off; and 2) through collective action – grassroots organizing and advocacy – we can fight back, and win!

Although it may not feel like we “won” in 2017, we did, in fact, win. Collectively, throughout the country, as a result of grassroots organizing and advocacy, we, the people, saved Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act!

This effort required constant vigilance, policy analysis, public education, numerous calls to action, and teaching people how to take action. And it consumed almost the entire year. We held community meetings, activist trainings where we taught people how to call their legislators (many were making these calls for the first time in their lives), issued action alerts, spoke to the media, and brought consumers’ stories to the media and to legislators. We coordinated with statewide and national efforts to fight off the attacks on the ACA and Medicaid. *And we did all of this while still serving our clients and getting people enrolled in health insurance.*

2017 taught us that we win by organizing. We win by activating and mobilizing local residents to fight for our health care and by coordinating our local efforts with statewide and national efforts in order to lift our voices in unison to protect our care.

We cannot rest on the progress that has been made – the fight is not over. The threats to the ACA, Medicaid, and Medicare have already begun, following the passage and President Trump’s signing of the massive tax cut bill. *The efforts to cut health care programs in 2018 will come through the budgetary process, and administrative and rule-making processes at the federal and state levels.*

This isn’t partisan or ideological. We didn’t hate these bills and advocate against them because they were Republican Party bills. We fought against them because from a health policy perspective, they would have harmed millions of people. These were totally indecent and vicious policy proposals cloaked in policy-speak and peddled through disingenuous talking points.

As we look ahead, let us take our comfort and inspiration from our own history of achievement, of struggle for the greater good, and from the good work that is happening here in our own community, some of which you learned about tonight in the Awards presentations.

All of us together, and in our own ways – whether we agree on everything or not – we are working for the public good, to create a healthier and more just community and society.

When we work for justice – whether it's fighting against an injustice, or creating something new to improve the lives of people – we are working for the public good and in the public interest.

But it's not easy. We are all too often David against Goliath. Our struggles are long and difficult, and it is easy to become discouraged.

One might feel discouraged and beat down, when one sees the ravages of the lives harmed and must bear witness, day after day, to the unnecessary and monumental suffering of people.

Sometimes we get tired. Sometimes we fall down. Sometimes we need others to help pick us up, dust us off, and help us get back to the struggle.

But whatever it takes, we have to fight, we have to keep working. It takes all of us. It is okay to get tired, but not to give up. Never give up.

We cannot turn away from human suffering; we cannot abdicate responsibility to do what we can for others; and we cannot give up.

Because what we are fighting for is justice. It is justice that gives people the ability to have a better life.

It is justice that reduces suffering. It is justice that makes life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness possible.

So, no matter how tired we are, how frustrated we are, we don't give up.

Amazing things happen when we work together, even for something that seems impossible. We come to know one another. We develop respect, trust, and even friendships. We achieve small victories that sustain us on the long and uncertain road.

We learn to celebrate, we learn to love one another. And tremendously important, we learn that we can count on one another. We gain a new faith – it is the faith that we are there for each other.

And so, in the midst of the long difficult work, we discover these precious and unforeseen gifts, these gifts that forever change us and make us better. And our hope and our faith are renewed and restored, and we keep going, and we don't give up.

My hope lives in regular people, who motivated by compassion and decency, come together to do extraordinary things. My hope lives with you, and for that, I thank you.

Now, on behalf of the Board and staff at Health Care Consumers, thank you so much for being here, and thank you for not giving up!

Thank you so much and have a great evening.