

Award: Harry J. Baker Community Service Award
Recipient: Chris Ray, Prairie Center
Presenter: Claudia Lennhoff

Tonight, I have the great honor and pleasure of presenting the Harry J. Baker Community Service Award to Chris Ray.

This award recognizes community members or organizations who distinguish themselves in public service to the community. And Chris, who is the Adult Services Coordinator at the Prairie Center in Urbana, and an active member of our Health Care Access Task Force, has distinguished herself in her longstanding dedication and work toward health care access and justice on behalf of her clients at the Prairie Center.

For those of you who may not be familiar with the Prairie Center, it is a non-profit substance abuse treatment center that provides addiction prevention, counseling, and detoxification services.

Chris is one of the founding members of the Health Care Access Task Force, which started in May of 2007, following a big community meeting that Health Care Consumers held to talk about the access to care crisis in our community. Chris attended that community meeting because too many of her clients were struggling with access to health care, even as they were struggling with addiction issues. Chris wanted to do something to help improve health care access for her clients, and so she dedicated herself to being an active member of the Task Force.

Anyone who knows or works with Chris on health care access issues knows that her motivation and dedication is to make

concrete improvements in the lives of her clients at Prairie Center. She is truly a champion for her clients.

Chris is kind of quiet – not boisterous or outspoken like some of our other Health Care Access Task Force members – Ron! Midge!

But still waters run deep, and when Chris speaks, she is grounded, clear, and practical.

Over the past several years, and especially this past year with the passage of Health Reform, the Task Force has held many community meetings and workshops, and it truly takes all of us to pull those events together, to develop the materials, to present the information, and to staff the events. Chris is steady and reliable, she's been there every step of the way, and we can always count on her to be at the events. Chris is a frequently a friendly face who greets and welcomes people coming to our events, and gets them registered.

Over the past four years, the only times that Chris missed monthly Task Force meetings was when she decided to take a wood turning class. I don't know why, but it came as such a pleasant surprise to us that Chris had an interest in wood turning, and we were so happy for her that she would pursue it. She came back to the monthly meetings when she was done, showing us a beautiful wood pen that she had created. As the pen went around the room, we had to keep an eye on folks to make sure it made it back to Chris.

One of my favorite times spent with Chris was a couple of years ago when a bunch of us went to Springfield to advocate for some health care legislation. I got to ride with Ron Eaker, John Hilty and Chris Ray.

On the drive to Springfield, I got to talking with Chris, and I think I asked her something about how she became an activist, and I just wanted to learn more about her background in activism and organizing.

Chris's response to my question surprised me and made it instantly clear to me that she is a brave person (and she's also very funny, with a kind of understated dry wit). Chris said something like, "I've never done anything like this until I started hanging around with you troublemakers."

In that moment, I really came to appreciate, in a deep way, Chris's courage and her dedication. I saw that Chris was willing to do whatever was needed, even if it meant that she would be stepping out of her comfort zone.

And so, for that and so much more, Chris, I and all of us at Health Care Consumers are so proud and glad to work with you, and to recognize you as a champion for those in our community who have the least and struggle the most. It is my privilege and honor to thank you and to present you with our Harry J. Baker Community Service Award.