

Award: Lester T. Pritchard Citizen Leadership Award
Recipient: Ron Eaker
Presenter: Claudia Lennhoff

Good evening. I'm Claudia Lennhoff, and I'm the Executive Director of Health Care Consumers, and it is my great honor and pleasure to present the Lester T. Pritchard Citizen Leadership Award to my dear friend, Ron Eaker.

This Award honors individual activists who use participatory democracy in the pursuit of justice. In 2010, we named this award, in memoriam, after Lester, our beloved Board member and fellow activist. Lester's life exemplified a dedication to the pursuit of justice and civil rights.

One quality that Lester had in glorious abundance is courage. And stubbornness. Lester would not be intimidated, dissuaded, or deterred!

So when we named the Citizen Leadership Award after Lester, we wanted to honor Lester by recognizing other Citizen Leaders whose activism demonstrate some of those important qualities.

Some of you may recall that Ron Eaker was the recipient of the Mike Doyle Activist of the Year Award in 2008 for his activism as a member of our Health Care Access Task Force. I am happy to say that Ron has not only continued his activism for health care access and justice, but he has taken it to a new arena, and in doing so, exemplifies the kind of courage – and stubbornness – that would have made Lester proud, and that is why we are recognizing Ron tonight.

Tonight, we recognize Ron for his Citizen Leadership as the very first consumer member of the Illinois Health Facilities and Services Review Board.

The Review Board is a nine member board that manages health care expansion in the state of Illinois by reviewing Certificate of Need Applications from health care providers who wish to expand, change, or close their facilities.

I'm sorry – I almost yawned saying all that. It doesn't sound very exciting. It sounds very bureaucratic and kind of boring, and it doesn't sound like the kind of board where you would expect to find drama and heroic action.

But in fact, Ron's work on that board has been truly heroic and courageous, and he has clearly created the standard for what a consumer advocate should be on that board.

Several years ago, I was appointed by our Attorney General to serve on a legislative task force that was charged with reviewing and making recommendations for the Health Facilities Review Board. The Board had been tainted by corruption under our former Governor, and the law that held it in place was going to sunset, so it was our

job to make recommendations to the legislature about whether to continue this board and its role, and if so, how to improve it.

We had a victory in the decision to continue and improve the Review Board. From a consumer perspective, the Review Board plays a very important role in the organization of health care services in local communities. We also had a victory in adding access to care for the underserved as one of the issues that had to be considered in reviewing Certificate of Need applications.

Another one of the victories we advocates won was to add a Consumer Advocate position to the now nine member board.

Later on, when the new board was to be implemented, Governor Quinn's office called me to see if I could help them find a consumer advocate to sit on the Board.

I immediately thought of my friend Ron Eaker. And then I felt guilty for what I was about to do – I was about to ask Ron to allow me to nominate him to serve on a Board that would require him to read literally thousands of pages of Certificate of Need applications per month, and spend the equivalent of an almost full-time job, including travel, to serve on this board. I love Ron, and despite that, I asked him.

And bless him, he agreed.

Ron was appointed as the first consumer advocate to the IL Health Facilities and Services Review Board in August 2010 by Governor Pat Quinn.

But agreeing to serve on the Board was not the heroic or courageous thing for which Ron is being recognized tonight – that was just masochistic.

We wanted to recognize Ron tonight, specifically, for steadfastly and courageously representing the consumer perspective on that Board – and in particular for his actions in the Oak Forest Hospital case.

The Oak Forest Hospital was being shut down piece by piece by Cook County officials, before they came to the Review Board with their application to shut it down entirely. This was happening against the tremendous outcry by the low-income, mostly African American residents of that community who depended on Oak Forest Hospital for their health care. If it shut down, they would have to travel much further at much greater expense and hardship in order to get basic or emergency health care.

This was a highly, intensely politicized situation, with every financial and political interest stacked against the community members, and every possible pressure on the Board and its individual members to approve the application for closure.

The issue of access to care for the community members was treated as inconsequential and something to be addressed "later."

In May of last year, Ron Eaker became a hero to the people of the community when he cast the single "no" vote to the application to close the hospital.

This issue was so contentious that several Board members stayed away from the meeting in order to avoid the vote. And so, with a smaller number of Board members present, one "no" vote would kill the deal, and against all incredible pressure, Ron stood with the people, made an eloquent impassioned statement, and cast that single no vote.

Ron voted his conscience, remembering that he was serving on the Board in order to represent the needs of consumers.

Still, the pressure was tremendous. And while Ron's actions were heroic to us, and to the people who depended upon the Oak Forest Hospital, Ron was attacked and reviled in the media in editorials and articles, and by politicians and health care administrators. How dare he?!

The hospital appealed and came back to the Review Board for another vote. And so, again, in August of last year, Ron held his ground. He was the only one of nine present who voted against the closure. So the Board voted to close Oak Forest Hospital.

A reporter for the Southtown Star wrote this: "Ronald Eaker, the state facilities board member whose lone vote kept the hospital open in May, was brilliant and inspiring in summing up the situation. He blamed Cook County's 'willful neglect' over the years for bringing about the hospital's demise.

"Many will die, and others will have their health seriously affected" because of the hospital's closing, Eaker predicted. He told county officials that the "contempt you have shown this board was only equaled by the disdain you've shown these citizens." Refusing to "pull the plug on Oak Forest," he once again voted, "No."

Ron's side – the people's side – lost that struggle. But Ron made sure it was a fight. He made sure that through his Citizen Leadership on that Board, the people would have a champion.

It is for this kind of stubborn, insistent, righteous courage that I am so proud to present the Lester T. Pritchard Citizen Leadership Award to Ron Eaker tonight.

Thank you, Ron. It is no small thing when I say that I do believe that Lester Pritchard would be proud!