



**Office of the Cook County Board President
Toni Preckwinkle**

REMARKS AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

President Preckwinkle speech to the City Club

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A lot has happened in the 11 months since I last visited the City Club. America elected Donald Trump our president. Illinois' governor has all but abdicated his core policymaking duties. And local leaders like me find ourselves carrying much of the governing burden while also facing criticism of an electorate manipulated—largely by one party—to hate government, even as it provides them with vital benefits and services.

People are living in fear, across the country and across Cook County. Fear of deportation. Fear of losing their health insurance. Fear of being shot, just because of the color of their skin, or being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

2017 has been a difficult year. And now more than ever, I find myself looking for the light, asking the question, who are we?

Who are we as Americans?

Who are we as a community here in Cook County?

And who are we as political leaders, navigating a new era, when faith in government institutions has never been lower, but the need for effective and compassionate government has never been greater.

As you know, the last few weeks and months have also been difficult for me politically, with a well-financed lobby, the beverage industry, spending millions of dollars against a tax I fought for. One that is supported universally by public health advocates. Rather than discourage me, this fight has refocused me and challenged me to better articulate my core beliefs about who we are in Cook County and what Cook County government does.

So today, I'd like to reflect on this political moment, to restate my values as a leader and vigorously defend the work and purpose of Cook County government, which is more important now than ever before. Because as Republicans in Washington and Springfield continue their systematic assault on the social safety net, our role in providing a critical backstop for our most vulnerable residents is essential and worth every penny.

I believe we have a moral and fiscal obligation to make sure that all our residents have access to health insurance and quality health care. I believe that young people in this county have been let down by government in so many other ways—like being used as political pawns in a cynical fight over public school funding, for example. These young people deserve a fair, equitable shake in our criminal justice system so that they can have more promising, productive futures.

Investing in communities isn't just about lifting up the people who live there, it's about lifting up the whole county and region, because our economic successes are deeply intertwined. The most successful regions in this country have the least inequality among their residents. When individuals are underutilized or whole communities are written off, our county is weaker and our economic potential is diminished.

We've let "government" become a bad word. We've let people who say we should "run government like a business" use that as cover for divesting from the social safety net. These people believe it makes economic sense to allow people to fall into financial hardship because one illness bankrupts them or because they can't afford bail on a minor charge that keeps them in jail when they needn't be.

Well guess what? We've seen where the "run government as a business" approach takes us when we actually put businessmen in charge, businessmen like Gov. Bruce Rauner and President Donald Trump.

It seems to me that both of these men have been surprised, although to different degrees, that good governance takes hard work, negotiation and compromise. Good governance also means considering the whole as opposed to just the most privileged parts, special interests whose voices are loudest because their wallets speak for them.

I've watched in horror, although not shock, as President Trump and his top messengers have attacked the fundamental values of our nation by legitimizing white supremacists, vilifying immigrants, trivializing suffering, attacking our health care system, denying climate change, dismantling civil rights gains and voting protections, and last, but not least, questioning the "morals" of Chicagoans. Because it's easier to defame us than to address the complex social and political history that contributes to our challenges.

Meanwhile, in Illinois, the governor forced the legislature to override his veto to end a 736-day budget standoff that jeopardized our state's financial solvency and threatened our public education system, especially our institutions of higher learning. This unprecedented and needless obstruction jammed leaders like me and places like Cook County, which had to budget

around the shortfalls we knew we'd face because the governor refused to do his job and make the tough choices necessary to fund our state government.

It is against this political backdrop that I am especially proud of what I have been able to do in my seven years as county board president.

- ***While the state went 736 days without a budget,***

Cook County has passed a balanced budget each of the seven years of my tenure. We closed \$1.8 billion in budget gaps—let me repeat that, \$1.8 billion—while responsibly shrinking our workforce by 10 percent.

Additionally, with the help of the expanded insured population created by the Affordable Care Act, we have not only improved health care delivery, but we also have reduced the taxpayer allocation to Cook County Health and Hospitals System by \$300 million, down 75% from the \$400 million taxpayer allocation when I took office in 2010.

- ***As President Trump says, he is waiting for Obamacare to fail.***

Well, Cook County is a national leader in making the Affordable Care Act succeed.

Of the 350,000 new Medicaid patients in Cook County, 140,000 of them get their coverage through Cook County's managed care program, CountyCare. Additionally, our system provides 45 percent of all the charity care in the county, even though our hospitals are only a few of the 72 located here.

These numbers are significant, but they do not tell the story of our success as well as our patients do. We know from our health and hospitals system the stories of patients whose lives are being transformed by the services we provide.

- Margo, a CountyCare member, was the victim of domestic violence and found herself uninsured when she left her husband. Through the advice of her advocate at the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services, she applied for CountyCare.

Psychiatrists at Heartland Health Outreach identified and treated Margo's PTSD and suicidal tendencies, prescribing medication and intensive therapy to get her life back on track.

Then, as a result of *finally* having health insurance, Margo consulted a dermatologist for spots on her face that had worried her for months. They were pre-cancerous. Through her CountyCare coverage, she received 10 weeks of topical chemotherapy and eradicated her skin cancer growth cells. Margo often says, "When people talk about the difference between life and death as it relates to Medicaid coverage, I'm living proof."

- Another CountyCare member, Mary Jo from the south suburbs, says her neighbors were shocked to learn that she was on Medicaid. Because despite the political caricature of Medicaid patients, they are not defined by geography, race or gender and they are often

our neighbors. Mary Jo suffered from chronic pain and through the process of applying for disability, was able to maintain continuity of coverage and care through Cook County. She tells her neighbors that without the intervention of doctors at Stroger Hospital she might be dead.

These stories are important, because Cook County Health and Hospitals System is not only about providing top-notch healthcare at our hospitals. (*Although we do*: Stroger this year was reclassified as a Level 1 trauma center and recognized by US News and World Report as a high-performing cardiac care hospital.)

Cook County Health and Hospitals System is also a standard-bearer in improving care coordination, investing in community health and pursuing innovative partnerships with non-profits and community groups so that our residents are healthier.

Just last week, I visited the Jorge Prieto Family Health Center in Little Village, one of 11 county health clinics that are regularly visited by a fresh food truck run through a partnership between our health and hospitals system and the Greater Chicago Food Depository. At these visits, our patients, who are identified by us as food insecure, receive between 20-25 pounds of fresh produce. The food depository has said this screening process is vital in transforming the health of county residents. Through June 2017, we have distributed almost 140,000 pounds of fresh produce to more than 5,000 families.

Our health and hospitals system also has launched a Medical-Legal Partnership pilot program, again through screening our CountyCare and system patients for various insecurities, including housing and food. The County then connects these patients with lawyers at LAF, the former Legal Assistance Foundation, who can help them secure civic legal aid or benefits, such as Medicaid, admittance into the Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance Program, housing assistance, as well as assistance with income, employment or immigration issues.

I mention these two programs because they contribute to the idea that if we are good stewards of public health, our work stretches outside hospitals and into communities. I read a piece last month in Health Affairs Magazine by two former leaders at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services who outlined the need for local public health officials to view public health initiatives as “critical infrastructure.” Just as we talk about our nation’s crumbling roads and bridges, they wrote, we need to maintain the “natural and historic bridge between the health care system and the community” by linking health systems with organizations focused on health-linked social factors.

Everyone sees potholes on the road and wants them filled. Just because we can’t see food insecurity that leads to obesity, diabetes and heart disease, doesn’t mean we shouldn’t invest in public health programs to make our communities stronger. I was especially interested to read that these two doctors and policy leaders, suggested that a potential funding mechanism for a nation-wide investment in public health could be a national tax on sweetened beverages,

citing the role of federal tobacco taxes in funding Medicaid's Children's Health Insurance Program, widely known as CHIP.

As we think about how the county provides a critical safety net for our most vulnerable residents, I would be remiss if I did not mention our progress and leadership on criminal justice reform. I've often said that our County jail lies at the intersection of racism and poverty – that to consider who and how and why people, especially young people of color, end up in jail, helps us reflect on our larger failings as a society.

I was proud to stand with juvenile justice advocates and members of the Illinois house last week, as we celebrated the signing into law of a juvenile record expungement bill we worked hard for. This juvenile expungement law is the fourth landmark win for us in helping young people get the second chances they need to go on to lead more productive adult lives. In 2014, we supported a law that raised the age of juvenile court jurisdiction to include 17-year-olds charged with felonies. In 2015, we fought for reforming the automatic transfer law that has since reduced the number of youth automatically transferred to adult court by 73%. And in 2016, we advocated for and won the end of mandatory five-year probation for juveniles.

To finish my remarks today, I'd like to tackle a few more contentious points I know you're all wondering about.

I've fielded plenty of media questions lately, and I'm sure I will after this speech too, about whether or not I think the Board of Commissioners will vote to repeal the sweetened beverage tax, perhaps as soon as this afternoon.

I *reject* the framing of this question.

In my view, this isn't a vote to repeal or keep a revenue source we already approved. It's about whether or not we want Cook County to be healthier, safer and more efficient or if we are willing to go backwards and let Cook County become sicker, less safe and less efficient.

To any commissioner considering this action, I remind you, that a vote to repeal is a vote to fire frontline health care providers: doctors, nurses and other medical professionals who help serve our most vulnerable patients.

A vote to repeal is a vote to halt plans for a new lifestyle center at Provident hospital, where I was yesterday. This center is designed to promote better health outcomes for our patients while also saving us money in the long-term, because treating acute and chronic illnesses is more expensive than preventing them.

A vote to repeal is a vote to compromise our Constitutional duty to provide for the legal defense of those who cannot afford counsel by taking away money from the Public Defender's office and forcing our already-overworked public defenders to absorb another 6,400 cases.

And a vote to repeal is a vote to reduce our vital community investments, especially our workforce development training programs geared at young people on the south and west sides.

Cook County programs like Career Launch, Opportunity Works and the Conservation Corps, together have helped us connect hundreds of Cook County young people between the ages of 16 and 24 to employment training and jobs.

In my view, the choice is simple. I will choose to protect our safety net and essential services every time. My sincere hope is that our commissioners will do the same.

But I understand and empathize with the immense pressure commissioners face as a result of the coordinated and expensive campaign that the soda industry is running against us. I'd like to leave you, however, with one last thought on Big Soda as they make their push to repeal this tax.

I've been thinking a lot about what Michelle Obama said earlier this year when asked about the Trump administration rolling back the healthy lunch program she implemented as First Lady. She said:

"Think about why someone is OK with your kids eating crap. Why would you celebrate that? Why would you sit idly and be okay with that? Because here's the secret: If somebody is doing that, they don't care about your kid."

So why is Big Soda OK with selling our vulnerable kids liquid sugar, which we know is bad for them? The answer, of course, is because it's their business. The only reason this tax is perceived to disproportionately affect poor communities is because Big Soda has spent decades preying on them. The soda industry doesn't care about the public health of these communities. It's just using them as pawns in a losing fight to maintain its revenue.

I have to acknowledge that it's hard to take the long view on the public's interest when faced with short-term political discomfort.

But I am not afraid to stand up for what I believe is right. And I am not afraid to stand before you today and remind you why I am here.

I didn't run for this job because it was glamorous. I ran for this job because it's important and because it focuses on things that I care about. Principally, the quality of health care we can deliver to the under- and uninsured and the effectiveness and equity of our criminal justice system.

I didn't pick this job because I thought there was some kind of aura around it or because I viewed it as a mere stepping stone to another office. I picked it because I knew that I could make a difference. Because I'm willing to work hard. Because I have worked to build a great team that can help us make the county more effective. And I think that after a very long period where people didn't have confidence in county government, when they thought it was a patronage backwater, we've brought back respectability to the county and dramatically improved the quality of services we deliver. And I'm proud of that. I'm going to try over the next

five years to do the best I can to implement the changes that we started in 2010. That's my goal.

Thank you.