

ONE-ON-ONE

Toni Preckwinkle

President, Cook County, Illinois Board of Commissioners



A dedicated community leader for more than two decades, Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle has worked with the Board of Commissioners, elected officials and County employees to implement major reforms and reshape County government.

Since taking office in December 2010, Preckwinkle has rebuilt the credibility of County government, fighting for more than \$1.4 billion in budget deficits and cutting \$465 million in expenditures. She established the County's first performance management initiative to demand more accountability from operations and employees. And, she has developed a policy agenda focused on critical public safety reform, strengthening the County's health care system and increasing the capacity of Chicago's regional and local economic development efforts.

Preckwinkle served for 19 years as alderman of Chicago's 4th Ward. A high school history teacher for 10 years, she holds a bachelor's and master's degree from the University of Chicago. She is the mother of two and the grandmother of three.

Your journey has taken you from teaching in a high school classroom to leading one of the most powerful governmental bodies in the country. You have been an alderman, nonprofit president and Democrat party committeeman along the way. What has been your most significant learning experience?

To this day, my most significant experience—and best training for public service—was learning to be a good teacher. For one thing, you won't find a much tougher audience than a classroom of teenagers. Each classroom is different; each has its own personality. You have the unique challenge of having to figure out the best ways to explain difficult, dense, complicated issues in ways that will resonate with students. You also have to manage multiple constituencies: students, parents, colleagues. It's hard to be a good teacher if you can't manage all of those relationships.

Your leadership and advocacy have spanned issues that tell the story of the American city: affordable housing, health care, living wage ordinances, compensation for victims of police brutality, to name a few. How deeply have these issues become ingrained in the public consciousness?

Governments at every level deliver services. The first thing they can do is work to deliver those services fairly and compassionately. That requires balancing constituencies. I've always believed it's not enough to make the right decision. You have to explain it to the widest audience possible and figure out the right argument for different audiences.

One of my priorities is public safety, specifically reducing the overreliance on pre-trial detention for non-violent offenders. It's detrimental not only to those individuals, but also to their families and the neighborhoods and communities they come from. But for some audiences, that doesn't resonate. They haven't seen it firsthand; they don't know or understand the personal impact. But, they do understand the financial impact: It costs \$143 per day to detain someone in the jail. We spend more than \$500 million every year to maintain a jail system to hold thousands of people awaiting trial for non-violent offenses.

You have compiled a long track record of working with local, state and federal governments to get the job done, whether the project is large or small. What are three things your experiences have taught you to ensure a project's success?

First and foremost, it must be inclusive. You can't just impose things on people or you end up fighting guerilla actions for the direction. Second, you have to hear everyone out. There must be as many different constituencies at the table as possible and everybody's got to feel they were heard. You may not be able to do what they want but you're a long way down the road if they were listened to. Third is accountability. You have to meet your commitments along the way. People have to believe you're making a good faith effort.

Managing large projects does not operate in a vacuum. It is subject to the twists and turns of tough economic times. Chicago faces those challenges now in unprecedented ways. How do you go about advancing your vision and goals for Cook County against the backdrop of Illinois' budget crisis?

I hope and pray for responsibility in Springfield, but you can't rely on that, so you have to do what you can where you are.

The practitioner-academic divide is not new but it is real. How can those who teach and study public administration contribute to the work of those on the front lines of managing public services?

They can talk to those actually delivering the services firsthand so they know the real challenges. In turn, academic work is tangibly connected and more meaningful to those doing the work. Practitioners need to value other opinions and utilize all the resources available to them, including academic data and research.

In this age of digital communication, the personal give-and-take essential to promoting public policy is not as appreciated as it should be. What role can professional associations like ASPA play in bringing together those who serve the public good?

They provide opportunities to learn best practices, network with other professionals and share successes and failures. While there are growing resources like new data and reports, professional associations allow individuals to connect with others uniquely qualified to relate to challenges and concerns, plus appreciate and learn from successes.

In public service, little can be accomplished without collaboration and cooperation. It's never too early to start to build your personal network—friends, colleagues, associates, mentors. All of them will help push you, help shape your thinking, or even just be in your corner. People I've known for decades still offer much needed advice, counsel and opinions. I may not agree with all of them, but I never underestimate their value.

"The common good" and "social equity." Both are central elements to the message you consistently deliver to current and aspiring public administrators. How have you seen these concepts evolve over the years? What factors continue to place them at risk?

Again, it's not enough to make the right decision; you need to explain it to the widest audience possible. The evolving role of the media has changed what that looks like. When I first started as an alderman, I was able to go largely under the radar. I engaged directly with my constituents and colleagues and

worked hard for the County. That has changed now that I am in the executive branch. But, the tone of media coverage has become more aggressive and political. It means you have to figure out the most effective strategy for the situation. It might not be a frontal assault. It may require building a coalition of third-party validators to help advocate and lobby for a cause.

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