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Karen Atwood: BCBSIL's Servant Leader

By Marilyn Ferdinand

Some people struggle to find their dream job, but Karen Atwood (MBA '82) found her niche right after graduating with a bachelor's degree in finance. She joined Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois (BCBSIL) as a junior staff accountant and found herself part of an organization that has held her interest for the long term. "I've had the good fortune to work for a company that provided me with many different opportunities," says Atwood, now president of BCBSIL.

It also helped that the business of health insurance has evolved constantly since Atwood started working at BCBSIL in 1979. For example, she has seen managed care enter the marketplace as a way to reduce costs and improve outcomes. Atwood explains, "Doctors and hospitals are rewarded for delivering better patient outcomes, fewer medical errors and higher-quality services, rather than being paid for performing more tests, treatments and procedures." Other innovations include the electronic medical record, which helps track individuals' health and treatment history, and coordinated care models, such as intensive medical home care, which takes a personalized, comprehensive approach to improve outcomes and reduce costs for those with chronic illnesses.

The most recent—and contentious—innovation on the health insurance landscape is the Affordable Care Act (ACA). "The ACA has fundamentally changed the way the health insurance and health care industries operate," says Atwood. To comply with those changes, BCBSIL "invested significant resources into preparing for the rollout," Atwood continues. "Even so, we still could not anticipate last-minute regulatory and rules changes. We all have to roll with the punches."

Still, little has changed in Atwood's approach to how she does her job. She has spent her entire career working to ensure that patients get the



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care they need when they need it without being overwhelmed by medical bills. Atwood ensured she would be well prepared to advance in her career and meet the demands of this sometimes volatile industry by earning her MBA from DePaul. "I attended DePaul taking two night classes a quarter," she says. "DePaul's being

in the heart of downtown allowed me to work and finish school at the same time. The day I graduated was a happy one for me. It gave me a real opportunity to sit for the CPA exam—it was an unfulfilled promise to my dad, and that made it really important to me."

Atwood lends her financial savvy and dedication to service to a number of local organizations. Her current affiliations include executive board membership on the Civic Federation and the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce, as well as co-chairmanship of the Civic and Business Advisory Committee for the Chicago Healthy Schools Campaign. Of another project, Atwood reflects, "It is an honor to work side by side with community partners like the Chicago Department of Public Health on our PlayStreets initiatives to foster healthy, active lifestyles by providing safe, supervised street events focused on exercise. I've seen firsthand the good work we can do for those most in need."

Atwood's interest in the arts led to a board of directors position with Silk Road Rising, a Chicago-based theatre company that specializes in Asian, Middle Eastern and Mediterranean content, from 2008 through 2012. Although she is no longer on the board, she continues to serve the theatre company as an alumni board member.

Since 2010, Atwood has shown her gratitude for her DePaul education by serving on the university's Board of Trustees. She says, "I have come to really appreciate the dedicated and committed staff who bring opportunities to many people who might not otherwise be able to attend college." Like most DePaul alumni, for whom the university's Vincentian character and mission have become part of their life plan, Atwood says, "I do it all because it is fun, and you really get more back than you can ever give."