



Board of Commissioners of Cook County

118 North Clark Street
Chicago, IL

Legislation Text

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PROPOSED RESOLUTION

HONORING THE LIFE AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF MARIA WHELAN

WHEREAS, Maria Whelan, one of Illinois' most impactful and effective advocates of early childhood education died suddenly on June 11, 2020. She was the longtime President and CEO of Illinois Action for Children, after working at The Carole Robertson Center for Learning and Erie Neighborhood House; and

WHEREAS, Maria was born to Mary and Duane Whelan on December 4, 1950 in the Northwest woods of East Hampton, New York. She was the third of twelve children and grew up in a home full of stories, songs, art, debate, social activism, literature and noise. A self-described "failure" as a high school student, she thrived at Clarke College, where she was surrounded by women who became her lifelong sisterhood, and where she first learned to recognize and apply her sharp intellect. She later earned a Master's degree in Social Services from The University of Chicago; and

WHEREAS, an authority in the early care and education field, Maria possesses over 30 years of experience in human services. Prior to joining Illinois Action for Children, she served as the founding Executive Director of the Carole Robertson Center for Learning. when Maria first began working at the St. Mary's school that became the Carole Robertson Center for Learning, she knew little about early childhood education or running an organization. That did not stop her. Over the next sixteen years, she helped grow the Center into the multicultural nonprofit partnership among parents, youth and communities on Chicago's West Side providing high quality early childhood education to children; and

WHEREAS, Maria embodied the Illinois Action for Children's mission to support strong families and powerful communities where children matter most, by working to advance innovative social service programs and responsive public policies that improve conditions for low-income families in Illinois. She studied early childhood practices and policies in other countries like Sweden and used that knowledge, as well as her own observations and experience, to push for more progressive policies for Illinois; and

WHEREAS, her leadership has been recognized through special awards and fellowships, including the Community Service Fellowship from the Chicago Community Trust, and Leadership Greater Chicago. She served on several boards, including the Illinois Early Learning Council, Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, Early Childhood Advisory Committee - Chicago Public Schools and Illinois Child Care Advisory Council - Illinois Department of Human Services; and

WHEREAS, Maria's passion for social justice, while embodied in her life's work was not limited to her work. She was as comfortable participating in and speaking at rallies demanding action by government officials as she was addressing boards and committees. On May 18, 2020 Maria appeared on WTTW to defend Gov. Pritzker's Restore Illinois Plan and the plan's proposal for a gradual re-opening of childcare centers to protect young families and children during the pandemic; and

WHEREAS, Grace B. Hou, Secretary, IDHS, in reflecting on Maria's passing wrote, "For those of you who had the opportunity to know (Maria), you can understand how hard it is to describe her. She could instantly captivate a room with her presence - joy, ferocity, passion, love, and intelligence. Her presence filled a room, but never overshadowed the mission. She was a compassionate warrior, relentless in her fight for children and for social, economic, and racial justice. She did that through her early childhood work as a way to lift up all families. She made us better. She made our early childhood system better. She made IDHS better. She made our state and country better;" and

WHEREAS, as her daughter wrote, “Her capacity for love was endless. Her love of gossip, deep. Her interests, quirky and specific. And her spirit and laugh filled every room she entered. To know Maria was to love her, to be charmed, to be interested, to be listened to, to be interrupted, to be entertained. She brought people together and demanded we all do better, especially in building a world where children are important and where they matter. She took solace in reading, in classical music, and in the beauty of Vermont where she shared a home with her siblings.”; and

WHEREAS, Maria leaves behind her husband, Jack Wuest - Executive Director of the Alternative Schools Network; her daughters Catherine Mary (Ian) Merritt, Ellen Rose Whelan-Wuest (Connor Stinson), Maeve Margaret Whelan-Wuest (Virgilio Larralde), and grandchildren Teddy and Archie Merritt, Evie Stinson, many siblings, nieces and nephews, and friends., who will all miss her dearly.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Board of Commissioners of Cook County, on behalf of the 5.2 million residents of Cook County honors the life and contributions of the **MARIA WHELAN**, and herewith expresses its sincere gratitude for the invaluable contributions he has made to the Citizens of Cook County, Illinois; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that a suitable copy of this Resolution be spread upon the official proceedings of this Honorable Body and that an official copy of the same be tendered to the family of the **MARIA WHELAN**.