



Board of Commissioners of Cook County

118 North Clark Street
Chicago, IL

Legislation Text

File #: 15-2435, **Version:** 1

PROPOSED RESOLUTION

COMMEMORATING THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE, ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND MEMORY OF JANET OTWELL

WHEREAS, Jan Otwell, former President of the League of Women Voters of Illinois, Director of the Illinois Department of Aging and a tireless advocate and community volunteer died on February 23, 2015 leaving behind countless friends, family and a community profoundly enriched for having known her; and

WHEREAS, Jan Otwell championed the value of civic engagement over a long life of volunteer and public service. She inspired Illinois citizens to greater awareness of public issues and participation in the democratic process through her leadership in the community, her service in state government, and her time spent volunteering in social service agencies; and

WHEREAS, Jan Otwell grew up in suburban Philadelphia and came to Illinois to study journalism at Northwestern University in Evanston. She received undergraduate and graduate degrees in journalism, and it was while working on the Daily Northwestern newspaper that she met her husband Ralph Otwell. He was a reporter and she was his managing editor. Jan and Ralph had three sons and, while Ralph rose through the ranks in journalism to become a top editor at the Chicago Sun-Times, Jan focused her energies on the family and became a valued volunteer in the community; and

WHEREAS, Jan Otwell was a member of the Illinois League state board from 1968 to 1981, and served as its President from 1977 to 1981. During this time she spearheaded the League's effort to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment in Illinois, and directed the Illinois Juvenile Court Watching Project, which was funded through the Illinois League. As President, she chose to take the Illinois League Convention to the neighboring state of Wisconsin after Illinois refused to ratify the ERA. In recognition for her decades of hard work and dedication to the League of Women Voters she was honored with the Carrie Chapman Catt Award, the highest honor the League bestows; and

WHEREAS, Jan Otwell was a tireless leader and advocate for the aging. Despite her being a life-long Democrat, Republican Governor Jim Thompson appointed her to head the Illinois Department on Aging. During her seven years in Governor Thompson's cabinet, she focused her energies on fighting elder abuse and neglect and to extend quality of life. One of her initiatives, "Ninety for the '90s," was a groundbreaking networking program that drew together leaders from business, labor, communications, health and religion to study and report on issues facing aging Illinoisans. She created the Task Force on the Status of Older Women in Illinois and later became the Midwest Director of the AARP; and

WHEREAS, Jan Otwell was appointed to and served on the Task Force on the Future of Illinois, the Bureau of Employment Security Advisory Board, and the White House Conference on Families. She served as Coordinator of the Governor's Task Force on Children and she was chairperson of the Long Term Care Committee of the National Association on State Units on Aging. She also chaired the Department of Children and Family Services Advisory Council; and

WHEREAS, Jan Otwell's commitment to her community was not limited to civics. Jan spent substantial time working to improve the lives of children, women, and the homeless through her involvement with Voices for Illinois Children, the Good News Partners and Deborah's Place; and

WHEREAS, while being universally regarded as a dedicated team player, Jan Otwell's exceptional abilities regularly

singled her out for distinction. In addition to many other recognitions and awards she was honored by the Chicago Metro Chapter of the National Caucus and Center on Black Aged for her efforts to improve the lives of the minority elderly. She received the first annual Wise Older Woman Award from the White Crane Senior Health Center in Chicago, the Northwestern Club of Chicago Community Service Award, and the "Friend of Children" award from the Child Care Association of Illinois and, for her work with the Intergenerational Initiative, she received the "Champion" award; and

WHEREAS, Jan Otwell's unfailing loyalty and her great generosity of spirit won her the affection and respect of the community. She was a role model for all who knew her and will be deeply missed. Jan Otwell and her husband Ralph resided in Evanston for nearly 31 years and the community has lost a treasured leader. Her loss will be felt even more acutely by her husband Ralph Otwell and their sons Brian, Douglas and David; their five grandchildren; and one great-granddaughter; and

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Board of Commissioners of Cook County, on behalf of the 5.2 million residents of Cook County commemorates the extraordinary life of Janet Otwell, and herewith expresses its sincere gratitude for the invaluable contributions she 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 Janet Otwell.