

Rodham Institute
3rd Annual Summit
Remarks by Senator Chris Dodd
October 2, 2015
Washington, DC

Before beginning my remarks, I want to thank the Rodham Institute for inviting me to come and speak today at the Third Rodham Institute Summit.

It's an honor to be included among such distinguished speakers and experts.

I want to recognize my good friend, Dr. Gigi El-Bayoumi, for the incredible work she has done creating this great organization. When it was founded two years ago, the Rodham Institute set out with clear goals and a clear vision: to partner with the community here in Washington, D.C. to educate and nurture the next generation of community-oriented health care providers so they can go out onto the streets of this city, and into communities throughout the country, provide quality health care for all and make a difference in people's lives.

Whether helping improve HIV prevention and care, mentoring middle and high school students interested in pursuing medicine, coordinating community volunteer experiences, or any number of the other activities you do, the Rodham Institute **is** making an important difference every single day.

I only had a few occasions over the years to meet Dorothy Rodham, and those occasions were very, very brief.

Yet, I am certain as I stand before you today that Dorothy Rodham would be, and is, deeply, deeply proud to have her named associated with the great work of this institute, and the people in this room for the phenomenal work you do every day to make a difference in the lives of people who desperately need support.

A courageous woman, Mrs. Rodham overcame a very difficult upbringing to raise a family of remarkable people and instill in them a lifelong passion for learning and helping others.

I know all of you know this story, or have heard it before, but it deserves being repeated over and over again – because her life and her ambitions, both personally and for her family, spoke directly to the purpose and essence of this institute.

Essentially abandoned by her mother, Dorothy Rodham left an abusive grandmother's house, and dropped out of school at the age of 11 to become a housekeeper earning \$3 a week.

But thanks to the great kindness shown by some teachers and others who took an interest in this child and in her well-being, Dorothy Rodham was able to finish her education.

Because of those acts of kindness and generosity, Dorothy Rodham came to recognize that compassion and determination are powerful tools to help people in need overcome their circumstances and achieve a better life.

These hard learned beliefs she passed on to her daughter Hillary and her talented granddaughter, Chelsea, who you heard from this morning.

It is not because she was the mother and grandmother of these two remarkable women that this institute bears her name, it is rather the life journey of Dorothy Rodham that personifies the very beliefs that lie at the heart of the Rodham Institute and energizes its mission.

So I am delighted to be with you all today.

In my previous life as a Congressman and United States Senator, I was privileged to be involved in some of the most significant issues facing our nation over the last four decades.

But of all the issues I worked on, there were few that I cared about more deeply than those involving the health and well-being of our nation's citizens, particularly children and families.

No issues are more vital or more fundamental to who we are as Americans than the way in which we treat and care for our fellow citizens when they are ill, particularly those, in the words of Hubert Humphrey, "in the dawn of life are young, the dusk of life are elderly, and those in the shadows of life, our poor and disabled, physically or mentally".

I want to thank Dr. El-Bayoumi for reaching out and allowing me to continue to be a part of these important issues by inviting me to be involved in the work of the Rodham Institute.

As head of the Motion Picture Association of America, I have the unique pleasure of having a movie theater in my office.

This past June, Dr. El-Bayoumi invited me to take advantage of that unique feature, by hosting a special screening of Pixar's wonderful film, *Inside Out*, and using the opportunity to engage our invited audience to have a dialogue about the state of mental health in our country today.

It was a great evening, drawing attention to one of the immensely important set of issues of our time. In the coming days I look forward to working with the Institute to continue those kinds of important conversations within the Washington community.

Because I firmly believe it is at the state and local community level where real change can happen. This has been true, time and time again, over the course of my career in public service.

States and communities have served as forward leaning laboratories and testing grounds to address important issues.

Pioneering advocates, recognizing a particular need in their community, have set out to find a new way of confronting that challenge and proving to those who serve at the national level that local solutions could be viable not only in one state or city, but on the larger scale of our country.

That was the case when I worked alongside Senator Ted Kennedy, his son, Congressman Patrick Kennedy, Senator Pete Domenici, Republican senator of New Mexico, Senator Paul Wellstone of Minnesota, Congressman Jim Ramstad, also of Minnesota, and Dorothy Rodham's daughter, Senator Hillary Clinton of New York, along with many others to ensure that mental illness was finally treated the same as any other illness in this country by passing the *Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act* in 2008.

During the debate of that legislation, which I was proud to manage on the floor of the Senate, there were some who wished to impose what is called a federal preemption clause - making all the wonderful efforts in some states to treat mental illness no differently than physical ones – null and void.

We defeated that dangerous idea. States, like the one I represented, Connecticut, had strong mental illness laws.

States like Connecticut had been the laboratory to prove how valuable and worthwhile those laws had been. That same approach had proven the value of legislation, like the Family and Medical Leave Act, child care, and an issue you care deeply about, community health based clinics.

What you have come to learn and appreciate here in the District of Columbia, and what many now appreciate around the country, is that there are few issues that are more important or touch the lives of more people than mental health.

One in five Americans suffers from some form of mental illness –roughly 44 million men, women, and children across this country.

Yet, despite how common these illnesses are, there are even fewer issues that we, as a society, are more reluctant to discuss openly or much less to seek help. Nearly one-third of those suffering from a mental illness never seek treatment for it.

One of the main reasons for that tragedy throughout our history has been that those suffering from these illnesses have been repeatedly stigmatized and marginalized; and regrettably and tragically their illnesses have not been considered equal to physical illnesses or disabilities.

With the passage of the *Mental Health Parity Act*, that has now changed and the adoption of that legislation is an achievement of which I am incredibly proud.

But, the fact is that even before we were able to do anything in Congress, several states across the country had already beaten us to the punch and enacted their own mental health parity laws.

In fact, my home state of Connecticut was one of the very first to enact mental health parity back in 2000. And while we were working to enact it on the federal level, I was taking a little bit of heat from constituents back home that were worried the law we passed in Congress might weaken the one already on the books back home.

The foresight of states like Connecticut paved the way for sweeping federal changes because they showed that those changes could work.

The same is true for the more than 1,200 organizations operating community health centers in over 9,200 locations throughout the country today.

Today, these centers provide comprehensive, quality health care services to over 24 million members of society who need it most it.

They provide everything from basic check-ups and preventative care like immunizations, to treatment for chronic diseases and mental illness.

They really are, in many ways, the backbone of our nation's health care system, making an important difference in some of our nation's poorest communities, both rural and urban. And they have been doing it for over 50 years.

Few know this, but it all started with one clinic in rural Mississippi and another in South Boston. Today, community health clinics are a national program that one in fourteen Americans rely on for their primary care needs.

Just as with Mental Health Parity, I take great pride in the knowledge that the people of Connecticut were also early pioneers when it comes to establishing community health centers.

The state's first center opened its doors in a small two-story building in Middletown, Connecticut in 1972, and now there are 13 organizations delivering care out of nearly 200 sites around the states to over 320,000 patients today.

In the five years since I was proud to co-manage in the Senate after Senator Ted Kennedy became too ill to serve and passed the Affordable Care Act, millions of federal dollars have gone to improve the services provided at these centers and expand their numbers throughout the country in order to eventually provide care for an estimated 44 million patients.

If these centers had not been so successful in the past, I guarantee you there would not have been such a push to include the significant growth in support for them in the Affordable Care Act. Why do I emphasize this point to you gathered here today? I'll tell you why.

The same pioneering spirit, the same desire to make an important difference in the lives of Americans who need help the most that led to Mental Health Parity and the growth of community health centers across the country, is the same spirit that I see at the Rodham Institute.

By educating the next generation of health care providers on how to go out into the community and provide important, compassionate medical care to those who might otherwise not get it, you are not only making a difference in their lives – you are setting an example for the rest of the country to follow.

You are showing every day how much of a difference those initiatives you champion mean to improving the health and well-being of the people who call this community home.

And on those days when you wonder if what you are doing at the Rodham Institute makes a difference – let me tell you something – the people living in Washington, D.C. know what you are doing and my former colleagues serving in the halls of Congress know what a difference you are making. There are damn few moments when I have regretted not being in Congress over the past five years, but if I see any effort to weaken the mental health parity bill or weaken the establishment of community health clinics, I may just rush back on to the floor of the United States Senate.

So keep up the great work that you are doing at the Rodham Institute. Keep making a difference at the Rodham Institute. Keep being pioneers at the Rodham Institute leading the way for the rest of our country.