

2nd Annual McKnight's Pinnacle Awards Gala Honors Veteran Leaders at Their Peak



Kimberly Marselas, March 22, 2024

A sold-out crowd celebrated the second class of *McKnight's Pinnacle Awards* winners Thursday night in a lively event that combined networking with unabashed appreciation for some of the aging services sector's most-dedicated professionals.

Awards went to a "Who's Who" of longtime leaders in skilled nursing, senior living and home care. In all, 30 were recognized for their roles as change-makers, their influence on industry standards and their ability to inspire others in the field.

"You are truly outstanding, and we thank you for being the great examples and role models that you've been — for decades. And while we look up to you with admiration and thanks, we also stand on your shoulders, better prepared to face our own tasks and better energized to make every tomorrow a better day," emcee and *McKnight's Long-Term Care News* Executive Editor Jim Berkman said in an opening toast.

This year's Career Achievement Award went to Mark Parkinson, president and CEO of the American Health Care Association / National Center for Assisted Living. After 13 years at the helm of the nation's largest nursing home advocacy organization, Parkinson in February announced [he will retire](#) early next year.

Accompanying him at the Pinnacle Awards were fellow 2024 honoree and AHCA/NCAL Senior Vice President of Government Relations Clif Porter and several staff members who made the trip from Washington, DC. Parkinson was introduced by his wife, Stacy, an attorney who co-owned several long-term care facilities with him before he became governor of Kansas.

She introduced her husband by recounting what he called the best compliment ever given him: A resident's family member had seen him gardening, washing dishes and visiting with residents of one of their facilities and asked how he could contact the owner to nominate him for employee of the month.

“He was so excited to come home that night and share that story with us,” Stacy Parkinson recounted. “He was so proud that someone thought he was a worker worthy of being employee of the month.”

Parkinson, who was one of 27 honorees in attendance, championed the efforts of the workers around him, including front line staff, in his acceptance speech. Both in his nursing home career and as a highly influential DC lobbyist, Parkinson said he has relied upon the teams around him.

“The greatest honor that I’ve had is being one of you, as a provider, and then the opportunity to represent you in DC and fighting on behalf of the caregivers who are providing great care every day,” he said.

Party for 200

The event was again held at the iconic Ivy Room, just off Chicago’s Magnificent Mile. The venue is inside the early-1900s era Medinah Temple, ornate with stained glass, rich wood-paneled walls and an elegant courtyard. It has been home to lively circuses, notable Chicago Symphony Orchestra recordings and now Chicago’s first casino.

More than 200 guests were treated to a spirited cocktail reception, dinner and dessert inside the upscale venue.

In addition to the Career Achievement Award, honorees were recognized in seven other award categories recognizing their contributions to the sector. Those were:



Jessica Fear, SVP, Behavioral Health at VNS Health, and Esther Kamara-Conteh, VP Care Management Operations, VNS Health

Inspiration Award

Mark Baiada, Chairman and Founder, BAYADA Home Health Care

Esther Kamara-Conteh, Vice President Care Management Operations, VNS Health

Esmerelda Lee, Chief Operating Officer/EVP, Century Park Associates

Roberto Muñiz, President & CEO, Parker Health Group

Cathy Williams, CEO, Winslow Campus of Care

Thought Leader Award

Joan DiPaola, Director Dementia Program Development, Harmony Village at CareOne Paramus
Jessica Fear, Senior Vice President, Behavioral Health VNS Health
R. Tamara Konetzka, PhD, Louis Block Professor of Public Health Sciences, University of Chicago
E. Joseph “Joe” Steier III, President/CEO, Signature HealthCARE

Agent of Change Award

Vassar Byrd, Incoming CEO, The Kendal Corporation
Deke Cateau, CEO, A.G. Rhodes
Kristen Duell, Executive Vice President of Experience & Innovation, FirstLight Home Care
Phillip Hill, Administrator, Principle Long Term Care
Colleen Kamin, Executive Director, Anthem Memory Care
Marianne Longo, Chief Clinical Officer, Help at Home
David Totaro, Chief Marketing and Government Affairs Officer, BAYADA Home Health Care

Industry Ally Award

Andrew Carle, Lead Faculty, Senior Living Administration, Georgetown University
Clifton Porter II, Senior Vice President of Government Relations, American Health Care Association/National Center for Assisted Living

Setting the Standard Award

Sheila Davis, Senior Executive Vice President, Area Operations, Always Best Care Senior Services
Jamie Dlatt, Chief Operating Officer, Legacy Healthcare
Charles “Chuck” Hastings, CFO/Vice President of Finance and Business Development, Juniper Communities
Kurt Merkelz, Senior Vice President, Chief Medical Officer, Compassus
John Swanson, CEO, Willow Valley Development Corp.
Raeann Voorhies, CEO, Vanda Health

Unsung Hero Award

Wendy Blackman, Director of Reflections, The Bristol at North Woodmere
Orah Burack, Senior Research Associate, The New Jewish Home

Business Partner Award

Tim Hadley, Former CEO, Evive Brands
Steven Littlehale, Chief Innovation Officer, Zimmet Healthcare Services Group
Cindy Smith, Director, Professional Services, Omnicare
Wendy Strain, Director of Consulting Services, Polaris Group

All nominees must be industry veterans with at least 20 years of experience in their chosen field. Winners are selected by a national judging panel. Each of the 2024 [winners](#) was highlighted in a [commemorative book](#) from the event and in an [online gallery](#).

The *McKnight's* Pinnacle Awards program is a joint effort of *McKnight's Long-Term Care News* and sister media brands *McKnight's Senior Living* and *McKnight's Home Care*.

The McKnight's family of brands brings the most up-to-date news in home care to industry insiders. The brand covers the segments of in-home personal care, home health, hospice and palliative care. Readers

are leaders in their respective organizations, ranging from owners and executives to clinical directors and other stakeholders. Content reaches an audience of 79,000, and focuses on news, trends affecting management decisions, personnel operations, patient care services, legal issues, facility design and resident safety. Features include updates on pharmacy service, legislation affecting the industry and vendor/product news.