Illinois Health and Hospital Association

Wolf Recognized for Her Distinguished Healthcare Leadership in Illinois

NAPERVILLE – In recognition of Brenda Wolf's distinguished healthcare leadership and service to the health and well-being of children, Illinois Health and Hospital Association (IHA) President and CEO, A.J. Wilhelmi today presented Wolf with the "Ruth Colby Excellence in Leadership Award," during IHA's 2026 Leadership Summit in Oak Brook. This award recognizes women hospital leaders for distinguished contributions to healthcare leadership in Illinois, exemplary leadership in healthcare delivery and hospital administration, a passion for improving community health, and a commitment to mentoring and developing aspiring female leaders in healthcare.

"We are proud to present the IHA Ruth Colby Excellence in Leadership Award to Brenda Wolf, who is an extraordinary healthcare leader and tireless champion for children," said Wilhelmi. "Brenda has spent her career improving the lives of children with complex medical needs and the families who care for them. She has led with purpose, invested in her community, and mentored women as they forged their career in healthcare. Brenda's leadership is grounded in compassion, partnership and an unwavering commitment to serving others."

For more than 35 years, Wolf served in a wide range of leadership roles at Chicago's La Rabida Children's Hospital, culminating in 12 years as President and CEO until her retirement in 2023. Brenda entered the field of children's health and developmental services with degrees in psychology and special education, working in residential facilities serving children with disabilities and complex medical needs. She went on to earn her MBA with concentrations on Health Administration and Marketing from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business.

"Brenda's impact on La Rabida is felt in every part of our organization and, most importantly, in the lives of the children and families we serve," said Rolla Sweis, President and CEO of La Rabida Children's Hospital. "Her leadership helped shape La Rabida into the organization it is today, while always keeping our mission and the needs of children at the center of every decision. Having had the privilege of following Brenda as President and CEO, I have tremendous respect for the legacy she built and the countless people she inspired along the way. This recognition from IHA is incredibly well deserved, and all of us at La Rabida are proud to celebrate her."

Throughout her tenure, Brenda worked tirelessly to ensure the well-being and long-term sustainability of La Rabida, which primarily serves families from low-income communities. She focused on effective and efficient service delivery, financial stability, and mission-driven growth. Under her leadership, La Rabida developed and expanded an NCQA-recognized patient-centered medical home program; strengthened care coordination, developmental, educational, and community support services; and advanced a comprehensive model of care for children and families.

Brenda also championed a child-, family-, and employee-friendly physical environment. She oversaw the funding, design, and construction of major renovations and new facilities for both inpatient and outpatient services. Her leadership extended beyond operations to building strong relationships with philanthropy, community partners, referring organizations, and government agencies at all levels. Wolf also served on IHA's Board of Trustees, where she brought thoughtful perspective, steady guidance and a strong commitment to the mission of Illinois hospitals.

IHA established the "Ruth Colby Excellence in Leadership Award" in 2024, in honor of Colby's tremendous legacy within the Illinois hospital community. At the time of her passing in 2023, Colby was the Silver Cross Hospital President and CEO.

Considered a visionary and respected healthcare leader, she made significant contributions to the hospital community with conviction and compassion. Notably, Colby took pride in mentoring women leaders in healthcare throughout her career. Her dedication to healthcare also extended to her service with IHA, where she served as Chair-Elect of the Board of Trustees until her untimely passing.

“Ruth understood that leadership is about more than managing an organization,” Wilhelmi added. “It’s about serving others, strengthening communities and creating opportunities for future leaders. She was truly exceptional, and we are proud to honor her memory with this award.”

In 2024, Mary Lou Mastro was the recipient of the inaugural “Ruth Colby Excellence in Leadership” award. In 2025, Mary Starmann-Harrison received the award.

IHA’s 2026 Leadership Summit unites healthcare leaders, visionaries and subject matter experts to address today’s historic convergence of challenges and opportunities.

About IHA

The Illinois Health and Hospital Association, with offices in Chicago, Naperville, and Springfield, advocates for Illinois’ more than 200 hospitals and nearly 40 health systems as they serve their patients and communities. IHA members provide a broad range of services—not just within their walls, but across the continuum of healthcare and in their communities. Reflecting the diversity of the state, IHA members consist of nonprofit, investor-owned and public hospitals in the following categories: community, safety net, rural, critical access, specialty, and teaching hospitals, including academic medical centers. For more information, see www.team-iha.org. Like IHA on Facebook. Follow IHA on X (formally known as Twitter).