



Summer 7-17-2009

## Alumnus Appointed as White House Advisor

Rachel Hatch  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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### Recommended Citation

Hatch, Rachel, "Alumnus Appointed as White House Advisor" (2009). *News and Events*. 5649.

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July 17, 2009

**Contact:** Rachel Hatch, (309) 556-3960

## **Alumnus Appointed as White House Advisor**

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - Illinois Wesleyan University alumnus Stephen Ondra has been appointed by President Barack Obama as the Senior Policy Advisor for Health Affairs in the Office of the Secretary at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Ondra, a 1980 alum who has built a reputation as one of the most renowned neurosurgeons in the nation, will advise Secretary Eric K. Shinseki on developing policies and initiatives aimed at the health system for veterans.

A veteran of the of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, Ondra was awarded a Bronze Star and the Army Commendation Medal during his service as a military doctor. "I have always believed that public service is a calling and an honor," said Ondra, who hopes his knowledge of both the military and medicine will be of assistance in Washington. "I believe that I have a relatively unique combination of experiences that help me understand the changes needed in our health system in general, and for our Veterans in particular."

Ondra spent months on the campaign trail for President Obama, advising on veteran and health issues, but said they never discussed a White House appointment. "The mantra of 'no drama, no ego and no promises,' was a real way of life [on the campaign]," said Ondra. "Everyone was working to get the President elected and the country headed in a new direction."

Ondra is no stranger to Washington. For decades, he has been advising members of the Department of Defense, Congress and the Executive Branch on health care issues. This is, however, his first government appointment, and one that is tackling the intricate issue of health care for veterans, and the overall health care system. "The complexity of the issues and the needed solutions are daunting," said Ondra. "The current system is both economically unsustainable and fails to give the country the value that we need or the quality we should have. We can and must do better."

As the director of spine surgery in neurosurgery at Northwestern University in Chicago, Ondra was used to long hours, a schedule he continues at the White House with 12- to 14-hour-days being the norm. Ondra took a leave of absence from Northwestern to accept the

appointment in the Obama Administration, and moved his family to Washintgon. “Luckily, my wife and children understand the importance of this work,” said Ondra of relocating his family. “Having been in the military, my family already understood and appreciated that it is not just the service member or public servant that serves, it is the entire family.”

Ondra said he is proud to be able to take a role in what he calls “historic times,” and looks forward to the work ahead. “Being able to help address those challenges as a part of the Obama Administration, is challenging, exciting and humbling. Fortunately, the people that I work with and have encountered in the administration, as well as across government, are the brightest and most dedicated group of people that I have ever had the privilege to work with.”

Earning his medical degree from Rush Medical College in 1984, Ondra performed his surgical internship and neurosurgical residency at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Following his deployment in Desert Storm and Desert Shield, he was assigned to Walter Reed and became the Director of Spine and Skull-base Surgery. After leaving military service in 1994, Ondra joined the Clinical Faculty at the University of Michigan. In 1996, he moved to Illinois' Northwestern University, where he served as the Residency Program Director Vice Chair, Director of Spine Surgery, Director of the Spinal Deformity Fellowship, Director of Spine Research, and Medical Director of the Neuro-Spine Intensive Care Units. He also chaired the Medical Device and Technology Committee at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. In 2006, he was promoted to Professor of Neurological Surgery at Northwestern. In 2008, he served on the Veterans Affairs group in the Obama-Biden Presidential Transition Team, as well as on the Obama-Biden Campaign Health Policy and Veteran's Policy committees.

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