



2018 Walks of Life Honoree William M. Denihan

Whenever local political leaders, or even Ohio's governor, sought someone to help oversee a department needing repair during the last half-century, they often called upon William M. Denihan as their change agent. Denihan retired August 1, 2017, as chief executive of the Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board of Cuyahoga County. His career in government service began 44 years earlier, in 1973, when he became Deputy Director of the Bureau of Workers Compensation for northeast Ohio. At the BWC, he uncovered a \$10 million fraud scheme that implicated more than 200 persons. He was able to institute systemic changes and earned a promotion as the State Claims Director for BWC in Columbus.

Among his jobs over the years were: first director of Ohio's State Employees Relations Board, Director of Personnel for both Ohio and Cuyahoga County, Executive Director of the Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services, Director of Highway Safety for Ohio overseeing the State Highway Patrol and Bureau of Motor Vehicles. For the city of Cleveland he served as Public Service Director, overseeing garbage collection, snow removal, bridges and all public vehicles, Public Safety Director in charge of the Departments of Police, Fire and E.M.S. and Acting Chief of Police on two occasions. While living in Dublin, Ohio, and serving as Ohio's Director of Highway Safety in the mid-1980s, he was a founding member of the annual Dublin Fest.

His ability to analyze and solve problems has helped state and local governments tackle complex issues and save taxpayers money. One of his most challenging problems came about 10 years ago when he was executive director of the Cuyahoga County Community Mental Health Board. He was asked to oversee the consolidation of that board with the county's Alcohol & Drug Addiction Services Board. The task was made more difficult, Denihan said, because both boards opposed the consolidation. The merging of the two agencies, however, saved the county about \$5 million a year and proved to be the right move for the clients.

Denihan grew up in a housing project in Euclid and attended St. Joseph High School. He served three years in the Army and shortly after opened Skill Staff, a temporary job recruiting service. He said the job gave him the ability to quickly evaluate how well a person would do in completing a task, a skill he later applied to determine if supervisors in the government agencies he managed were efficiently carrying out their responsibilities. When Chernobyl's nuclear power plant exploded in Russia, Governor Richard Celeste appointed Denihan to review the safety protocols of Ohio's two Nuclear Power plants and determine if they were safe to continue operation. While serving as acting director of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Denihan oversaw the building of Cleveland's Inner Harbor and the reclamation of Euclid Beach as a state park.

Shortly after Denihan ran for Mayor of Cleveland and lost in 2001, he was selected by Bishop Anthony Pilla to lead a commission to investigate the handling of child sex-abuse cases in the Catholic Diocese. Over the past few years he led an advisory committee reviewing the settlement agreement between the U.S. Department of Justice and the city of Cleveland regarding the police department's use-of-force policies and took a leadership role in fighting the opioid crisis. In 1998 while serving as Cleveland's Safety Director at age 61 he received a B.A. in Urban Affairs from Cleveland State University College of Urban Studies. He was awarded an Honorary Degree, "Doctor of Public Service" from Cleveland State University, where he was recently appointed to serve as a senior fellow. He has also joined the boards of Edna House and Stella Maris, drug recovery homes for women and men respectively.

Denihan, whose Irish grandparents initially settled in Connecticut and Pennsylvania, has seven children from previous marriages. Mary, his wife of 29 years brought four children to the marriage, resulting in 11 children, 24 grandchildren and 28 great-grandchildren. He has one sibling, Robert, who has enjoyed a lifelong career in the publishing business. He and his wife live in a home on Cleveland's West Side with a view of Lake Erie, where he pursues his passion for painting.

2018 Walks of Life Award of the Irish American Archives Society, Cleveland OH.