

# Title Page & Abstract

An Interview with Jess McDonald

Part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library  
*Illinois Statecraft – Jim Edgar* Oral History project

Interview # ISG-A-L-2010-040

Jess McDonald, Director of the Dept. of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities, and then the Dept. of Children and Family Services during the Jim Edgar administration, was interviewed on the date listed below as part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's *Illinois Statecraft – Jim Edgar* Oral History project.

Interview dates & location:

Date: Aug 20, 2010    Location: Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library

Date: Sep 3, 2010    Location: Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library

Date: Oct 4, 2010    Location: Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library

Date: Oct 11, 2010    Location: Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library

Interview Format: Digital audio

Interviewer: Mark R. DePue, Director of Oral History, ALPL

Transcription by: Audio Transcription Center, Boston, MA

Edited by: Dr. Mike Czaplicki, project historian and Rozanne Flatt, ALPL Volunteer

Total Pages: 137 pgs    Total Time: 2:29 + 2:05 + 2:14 + 1:14 = 2.48 + 2.08 + 2.23 + 1.23 = 8.02 hrs

Session 1: Early life, Vietnam experiences & early years in Child & Family Service

Session 2: Work Gov. Thompson's budget office, DCFS & Mental Health issues

Session 3: Service as Gov Jim Edgar's Director of DCFS

Session 4: Service as Gov George Ryan's Director of DCFS & Gov Rod Blagojevich

Accessioned into the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Archives on Mar 30, 2011.

The interviews are archived at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois.

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# Abstract

Jess McDonald, *Illinois Statecraft*, ISG-A-L-2010-040

**Biographical Information Overview of Interview:** Jess McDonald was born on November 24th, 1941 in Chicago, Illinois, and grew up in Maywood, a suburb of Chicago. Following service in Vietnam from 1965 to 1966, he attended Illinois State University, then the University of Chicago for a Masters Degree in Social Work. He began working as a case worker for the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) in 1970 after graduating from ISU and prior to graduate school. After receiving his Masters Degree, he worked as a legislative analyst and then returned to DCFS in staff positions. From 1976 through 1985 McDonald worked in Governor Jim Thompson's Bureau of the Budget, before becoming an assistant to Thompson for Human Services. At the end of Thompson's administration, Jess was serving as acting director of DCFS.

From 1990 to 1992 McDonald worked as the Executive Director for the Illinois Association of Community Mental Health Agencies, a private, not-for-profit organization. In 1992 Governor Jim Edgar selected him to serve as the Director of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities, and in 1994 the Governor asked Jess to take over a troubled and dysfunctional DCFS. For the next ten years he served as the department's director, through both the Edgar and George Ryan Administration. During that time, McDonald led the agency through a remarkable turn-around, dramatically increasing the number of adoptions while improving the overall service and management of the agency. Over that span, McDonald was credited with creating a model department, receiving numerous state and federal awards. Since his departure from government service in 2003, he has continued this work as a consultant.

**Subject Headings/Key Words:** IL Dept of Children and Family Services (DCFS); Gov Jim Edgar; Gov Jim Thompson; Gov George Ryan; ACLU lawsuit against DCFS in 1988; Illinois Association of Community Health Agencies; Baby Richard (child custody) case; Keystone Kids (child welfare); Vietnam War; IL Dept of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities; Il Bureau of the Budget during Thompson Administration; Gov Dan Walker; Gov Rod Blagojevich; Senator James 'Pate' Philip; adoption reform in Illinois

**Note to the Reader:** Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

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