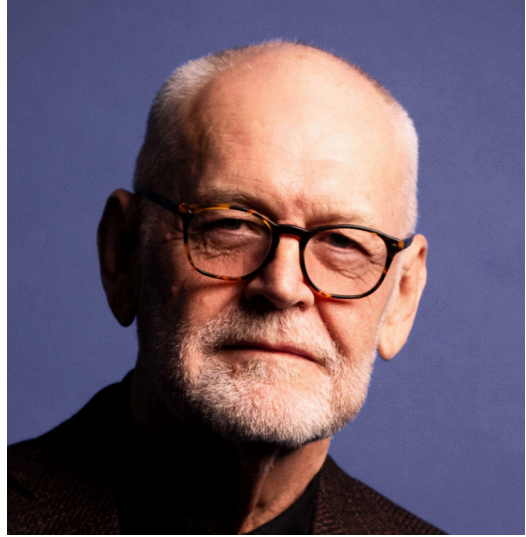


## Why Insured Americans Still Need Charity Clinics

(Episode 317)

*featuring Wendell Potter*  
*Center for Health & Democracy*



## *This time on Code WACK!*

Why are people in America resorting to receiving medical care in animal stalls — even if they have health insurance? What would it take to make volunteer stopgap clinics unnecessary — and who stands in the way of real reform?

To break it down, we spoke with leading healthcare reform advocate and New York Times bestselling author [Wendell Potter](#). A former health insurance executive turned industry whistleblower, Wendell now serves as board president of the [Center for Health and Democracy](#), which advocates for healthcare reform, and editor-in-chief of [HEALTHCARE Un-covered](#), which investigates healthcare corporations and insurance conglomerates. *This is part two of a two-part series.*

## **SHOW NOTES**

*Episode 317, February 16, 2026*

## WE DISCUSS

*You recently wrote about the New York Times column by Nicholas Kristof entitled, "[Can We Really Afford to Let Healthcare Get Any Worse?](#)" What stood out to you most about that piece?*

**Potter:** Well, the piece focused on people who resort to charity to get care in this country. And in particular, they report and talk a lot about and have photographs of people who go to clinics that are put on by Remote Area Medical, which is a nonprofit organization that for the last couple of decades has been providing coverage to Americans throughout the country, rural areas in particular, but increasingly in cities as well too, for people who just can't get, they don't have enough money to buy insurance or they are in plans with high out-of-pocket costs and they don't have enough money to pay what they have to pay upfront before their coverage kicks in.

Remote Area Medical changed my life. As a matter of fact, in 2007 I was still working at Cigna and I went back home to Tennessee to visit my family and I read about this organization, Remote Area Medical, that was putting on a free clinic at a county fairground near where I grew up.

And I went there out of curiosity and it changed me, it stunned me to see what I was witnessing. People were standing in long, long lines in the rain. They were soaking wet, but they were desperate to get care. Many people had slept in their cars and trucks the night before to have greater assurance that they could get into this fairground to get the care that they needed.

That was bad enough. But then I noticed that those lines, in many cases, led to animal stalls....

*How did we get to a point where having an insurance card no longer means having access to care?*

**Potter:** Because insurance companies have done an exceptionally good job of persuading our politicians that they know better – that they should be given the chance to provide our system of health insurance.

And I know for a fact, because I worked for these companies for 20 years, I know how good they are at their propaganda. I was a propagandist for this industry. I know how they pull this off. They also spend a lot of money on lobbying expenses, but also campaign contributions. And they give as much, if not more, money to Democrats than they do to Republicans.

... I'm hoping that we will soon get to the stage in which politicians, particularly Democrats, will refuse to take money from this industry.

I want candidates to see campaign contributions from insurance companies as toxic. We got to the point that a lot of them wouldn't take campaign contributions from tobacco companies. We need to get to the point where candidates will refuse to take campaign contributions from health insurance companies. But again, to answer your question, it's because these companies have done an exceptionally good job of persuading our politicians, often with campaign contributions, that they need to stay in the game. They have been the reason why we've made so little progress toward getting to a Medicare for All-type-of-system.

*Is the fact that so many providers volunteer their time and talent represent a success story? Or is it evidence of systemic failure?*

**Potter:** We accept that this is a safety net. It is not a safety net. It is not. And [Remote Area Medical] don't have the capacity to meet the need. Keep in mind that a lot of people who come to these clinics, like I said, they often line up well before dawn to get into the clinic. And in many cases, the lines are so long that they can't take everybody. So people are turned away at many of these clinics. So as good as this organization is already, the demand is too great. And so a lot of people sadly go without. People who

get in, in many cases are lucky. They're able to get dental care and vision care and even hearing care and basic medical care.

But a lot of folks are not lucky enough to get in or they don't have transportation. I learned that Remote Area Medical sites that I went to in southwest Virginia, they'd been doing a clinic there once a year in late July for about nine years. And I didn't even know about it, but I found out that people drive from hundreds of miles away to this little town in southwest Virginia in the coal mining section of Appalachia to get care. But a lot of people don't have cars and trucks to drive hundreds of miles or are able to take off from work. So that limits you too as well. A lot of people in this country are working two and three jobs, but they don't have health insurance and they can't take the time off to get the care that they need even to go to a Remote Area Medical clinic.

## Helpful Links

[HEALTHCARE Un-covered](#), *Wendell Potter*

[Remote Area Medical](#)

[National Association of Free & Charitable Clinics](#)

[America's Health Centers: By the Numbers](#), *National Association of Community Health Centers*

[Combatting tobacco industry lobbyists in public health](#), *National Library of Medicine*

# Episode Transcript

*Read the [episode transcript](#)*

## Guest Biography - Wendell Potter

**Wendell Potter**, Editor-in-Chief, **HEALTH CARE uncovered**, is a leading advocate for health care system reform in both the political arena and the marketplace.

Working dual roles, Wendell is board president of the **Center for Health and Democracy**, and he regularly engages across the political spectrum to discuss health insurance issues with members of Congress, state legislatures and their staffs. He is also the editor-in-chief of **HEALTH CARE un-covered**, which investigates and reports on health care corporations and insurance conglomerates in particular. He frequently posts on X.

A New York Times bestselling author, Wendell returned to his first career of journalism after serving for two decades as head of communications for two of the country's largest insurers, Cigna and Humana. He became an industry whistleblower when Congress was debating what became the Affordable Care Act. Wendell testified before several Senate and House committees, pulling the curtains back on prevalent industry business practices that resulted in higher health care costs and a growing number of uninsured and underinsured Americans.

His first book, **Deadly Spin**, won numerous awards and is still used in journalism and health policy classes at universities across the country. He has contributed to The New York Times, The Washington Post, USA Today and many other publications, and has appeared frequently on CNN, NPR, MSNBC, Fox Business and other media outlets.

# Host Biography: Brenda Gazzar

**Brenda Gazzar**, the host and co-producer of **Code WACK!**, has produced over 300 weekly podcast episodes topping 400,000 downloads. A skilled interviewer and storyteller, Brenda brings nuance, curiosity, and clarity to every conversation.

Brenda has worked as a multilingual and award-winning reporter with more than two decades experience in California and the Middle East.

Her work has been published by Reuters, Ms. Magazine, USA Today, Los Angeles Daily News, the Orange County Register, The Wrap, The Jerusalem Post, Cairo Times and numerous other publications. She speaks Spanish, Hebrew, and moderate Arabic and is the recipient of national, state and regional awards.

Brenda also enjoys being a life coach, helping people align with their purpose so they feel fulfilled while achieving their boldest dreams.

Brenda's work is grounded in a belief that systemic change and personal growth go hand in hand — and she's here for both.

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