



PROFILE: ILLINOIS SENATE DEPUTY MAJORITY LEADER LAURA MURPHY

Lifelong resident talks about how service in local government shapes her work as a legislator, and why higher education is the key to a bright future for her state

by Mitch Arvidson (marvidson@csg.org)

Very early in her career of public service, as an alderwoman, Illinois Sen. Laura Murphy learned not only how much government matters to people, but how much they paid attention.

“You could not go to the local grocery store without someone stopping you about a particular issue that they might have,” she recalls of her time on the City Council. “It really makes you realize the importance you play in people’s lives.”

She is quite a bit farther away from those constituents now when conducting legislative business: Illinois’ capital of Springfield is about 200 miles away from her hometown of Des Plaines, a northern suburb of Chicago.

But those constituents are still at the top of her mind.

“How would I be approached at the grocery store if I made this or that decision?” she asks herself when choosing what legislative policies to pursue and how to vote on various measures.

After eight years on the Des Plaines City Council, Murphy was appointed to the Senate in 2015, won a close race one year later, and then ran unopposed in 2020 — a year in which she also ascended into leadership for the Senate Democratic Caucus.

She recently talked to CSG Midwest about her views on effective leadership, lessons from local government that she carried to Springfield, and why she focuses much of her legislative work on higher education. Here are excerpts.

Q How has that experience in local government, eight years as an alderwoman, contributed to or influenced your work as a state legislator?

A So many of the policy decisions that we have to make impact local government. ... That is a helpful perspective to take up to the next level, when you are a little bit more removed from everyday constituents; people do not necessarily pay as close attention to state government as they do to their local government. It just reminds you all the time, from a local perspective: How would this be handled? How would people react?

Q How do you think the job of a state legislator, or the role of state government more generally, has changed in the last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic?



BIO-SKETCH: ILLINOIS SENATOR LAURA MURPHY

- ✓ selected as Illinois Senate deputy majority leader in 2020; member of the Senate since 2015
- ✓ served for eight years as alderwoman in the northern Chicago suburb of Des Plaines
- ✓ professional background includes two decades of experience in health care and social services management
- ✓ once served as a member of Illinois Liquor Control Commission, where she worked to educate youth on alcohol and tobacco prevention
- ✓ lives in Des Plaines with her husband and son

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A People do not anticipate that life as we know it will come to a screeching halt. For us in Illinois, it was March 16, and boom, everything was shut down. For those that were impacted by job loss, it highlighted the government services that need to be provided to help productive citizens remain productive citizens. Never was there a greater time to experience, to understand, and to see how government roles and services fulfill a significant need in people’s lives.

Q In 2020, you entered legislative leadership, as Senate deputy majority leader. What does this entail, and how do you approach your leadership role?

A We serve at the pleasure of the Senate president [Don Harmon], and we take on responsibilities to not only provide leadership to our constituents, but also to our members. The way the Senate president structures it, we are assigned certain tasks that help facilitate his performance in accomplishing [the caucus] agenda throughout the General Assembly.

I tend to be an inclusive leader; I like to solicit people’s opinions. When you do that, people feel a part of the decision-making process and are more willing to enact the final decision. I like to check in on members, create a dialogue and conversation, and help them.

Q You entered leadership in 2020, a challenging period because of the pandemic and

because you have so many new members of the Senate — 29 of the 59 came to the chamber in 2018, 2019 or 2020. What has been the impact?

A Without the normalcy of in-person session last year, everybody has needed some guidance. ... How do I get this bill passed? How do I get people to support and agree with my philosophy and policy? How can I steer constituents to information to make an educated decision? All those factors go into what we as leaders try to work with our members on and to give them those skills. After we lost a year of that in the pandemic, it’s even more important now to reinforce those practices.

Q The General Assembly has had some significant leadership turnover as well, including changes in the Senate president and House speaker over the past two years. How does this impact other members?

A Every person has his or her own leadership style. There is a responsibility of every member to learn the new leadership style, to learn how to build that relationship with the new Senate president and with the new speaker of the House.

Because at the end of the day, we want to deliver for our constituents. That’s what we are here for. All of that is about relationships. You have to re-establish relationships; you have to build trust; you have to learn their style.

Also, sometimes, given our structure as elected officials, there are other people who have been around longer, like lobbyists or staff members. You have to make sure it’s the elected official making decisions and not these other influencers.

Q Looking forward, what are your legislative priorities for the rest of 2021 and beyond?

A Illinois has had some struggles and its challenges, but I know and believe in the greatness of the state. Going forward, I hope we take this pandemic as an opportunity to make the changes we need to get our fiscal house in order.

To get there, we need to encourage people to remain in the state. ... I serve on the Higher Education Committee, and I believe that higher education truly is the key to the stability of a state. I want to focus on ensuring that our state universities are the flagship universities of the Midwest. We need to have a structure that keeps our young people learning in Illinois, staying in Illinois and earning in Illinois.

That is how I see us turning Illinois around — through our young people through our higher-education system. Of course, in order for the higher-education system to be successful, K-12 has to deliver what it needs to. I think we are becoming one of the better states in our early-education system. If we can do well from early ed to higher ed, we’re going to build a really wonderful, well-rounded individual that contributes back to the community.