



PROFILE: NORTH DAKOTA SENATOR JUDY LEE

After nearly 30 years as a legislator, longtime leader on health policy values two parts of the job above all else — ‘the problem solving and the people’

by Laura Tomaka (ltomaka@csg.org)

Judy Lee has never been one to spend much time on hobbies. “I don’t watch soaps; I don’t bowl; I don’t knit; I don’t play games,” she says.

If she has any kind of pastime at all, it’s problem-solving, and nearly 30 years ago, the North Dakota native found the perfect outlet to pursue it — as a member of the state legislature.

“This is all scientific method,” Lee says. “I learned that from the best chemistry teacher in high school, and everything works that way.

“Being in the legislature, you look at what the problem is, and you do the research you need to do to figure out what the potential solutions might be. ... Which option looks most likely to succeed?”

“That approach applies to darn near everything.”

As good a fit as legislating has turned out to be for Lee, she wasn’t initially drawn to the work. She instead was drawn in — identified by others as a potentially strong candidate and legislator thanks to her many years of community service (League of Women Voters, Chamber of Commerce, work for hospice, senior living centers, vocational training, etc.) and more than a decade on West Fargo’s Planning and Zoning Commission.

In 1994, Lee was asked by her departing state senator to run for his seat. But at the time, as a mother with two college-aged children and a full-time job in real estate, she balked at the idea.

Others, however, seemed to have a different plan for Lee.

“Any place I went, people would tell me, ‘Judy, you have to run for Senate.’”

Her sister from Colorado called urging her to jump in the race, and then-North Dakota Gov. Ed Schafer made a point of approaching Lee during a stop in Fargo.

“I thought, Who got to him?” Lee jokes.

All of those voices became enough for Lee to change her mind and run for the legislature in 1994. She won that initial race and has since become a fixture in North Dakota’s Legislative Assembly, including as chair of the Senate Human Services Committee since 2001.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Lee discussed her many years as a health policy leader and her approach to legislating. Here are excerpts.

Q You have focused quite a bit on reforms to the state’s behavioral health system. What advances have you seen in this area, and what are some of the ongoing challenges?



BIO-SKETCH: NORTH DAKOTA SEN . JUDY LEE

- ✓ first elected to the Senate in 1994; has served as chair of the Senate Human Services Committee since 2001
- ✓ graduated from the University of North Dakota with a degree in clinical laboratory science and worked for 10 years in that field
- ✓ worked as a real estate broker for 35 years
- ✓ served 12 years as a member of the West Fargo Planning and Zoning Commission
- ✓ lives in West Fargo; she and her late husband, Duane, have two adult children and three grandchildren

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A One major change is that we’ve gone from a time when many thought that these were self-induced problems [that didn’t require state intervention] ... We’ve become smarter. If we don’t intervene early, we’re going to be spending a boatload of money on higher levels of health care or in the criminal justice system, which is pricier.

We have been working on these issues for some time, and it’s a work in progress. We have a problem with access — especially in rural areas. ... It’s hard to get [behavioral health] professionals to come to North Dakota, period. And it’s even harder to get them into the small towns, in particular. ... Our goal is to have the same services available to everyone in North Dakota no matter where they live. They just may not all be provided in exactly the same way in every place. ... We have to do our best to continue to recruit and retain professionals, even with telehealth.

Q On that access issue, the state now has a voucher-based system for people in underserved areas to get substance abuse treatment. They choose a provider; the state reimburses evidence-based services. How has this program been received?

A It allows people to see providers in their local area [rather than in a designated service region]. ... It was so well received by both providers and patients that, last session, we budgeted nearly double the money because it’s so effective. I think it’s a model that other [rural] states can try out. ... It’s a great, broad-ranged tool to enhance behavioral health services.

Q What are some of the other top agenda items right now for you and other health policy leaders in North Dakota?

A We’re integrating the Department of Human Services and the Department of Health. Many states have integrated programs, but we have not. So right now, we have people working on the same issues, but working in separate departments. Suicide data, for example, is kept by the Department of Health. The prevention programs are in the Department of Human Services.

An integration of those two departments will be so much better. There are going to be a lot of benefits in terms of how we serve the public. Our workers will be able to share information and find ways of providing service. We are confident that this is going to end up being more efficient and effective.

Q What do you view as the role of a committee chair like yourself in mentoring and helping newer members?

A Making sure that the new people coming in know what’s going on is something I have always thought was important as a committee chair — both during the session and the interim. The Human Services Committee is not a committee that everybody volunteers for at first blush. ... It’s scary sometimes because there is so much there, and you can’t get it all in the first session you’re here.

Q After nearly three decades in the legislature, what

about the work do you value the most?

A The problem solving and the people. I can’t imagine serving all these years without some of the people I worked with in the House and the Senate. Not only because they were/are good at the job, but because they’ve become family. The same goes for the government employees with whom we work directly and the lobbyists who professionally represent their organizations. And, of course, there are the citizens you get to know — those who testify at committee hearings or whom we see in other places. These people are all really special to me. My life would have been much less complete if I had not had an opportunity to meet them and get to know them.

Q Nationally, there has been quite a bit of discussion about a decline in civility. What have you seen in North Dakota?

A It’s important to have some balance of ideas and to be respectful of people when they’re expressing those ideas, but we are running into some lack of civility that interferes with doing the right stuff. ... I wish people would express [those ideas] with a little more civility.

You shouldn’t have to have Highway Patrol come in and sit in committee in order to make sure people behave. It’s not the way to get things accomplished. I expect spirited discussions, but not angry ones. We should be able to have civil discussions and to listen to any input. ... I think we need to return to courteous public engagement that fosters positive learning for everyone.