

# PROFILE: JOHN ARCH, SPEAKER OF THE NEBRASKA UNICAMERAL LEGISLATURE



New leader believes a healthy legislative culture is built in two ways — members taking the time it takes to understand the issues, as well as each other

by Tim Anderson ([tanderson@csg.org](mailto:tanderson@csg.org))

*"Tell me your story. Why are you here?"*

It's a question that John Arch encourages all 49 members of Nebraska's Unicameral Legislature to take the time to ask of one another, as a building block for stronger relationships and a healthier legislative institution.

"We all have a story of what brought us here, of why we decided to serve," he says. "Sit down and just ask that one question of each other, without any kind of agenda.

"When you hear that senator speaking on the floor [of the Legislature] or in committee meetings, it's going to make much more sense. And maybe you'll think, if I had that same story, I may believe the same way. You don't have that same story, of course, but you can at least understand it."

Arch became speaker in early 2023.

The top leadership post in Nebraska's nonpartisan Unicameral Legislature is unique, and doesn't carry some of the powers of speakers in other U.S. state legislatures — Arch, for instance, doesn't lead a party caucus or control who leads committees.

But as speaker, he does have important leadership roles to play, from the scheduling of bills and adherence to the rules, to the overall workflow and functioning of the legislative body.

And to operate most effectively, Arch believes, the 49 members must be committed to this: "Talking with each other, not about each other."

"Having that kind of healthy culture is something as speaker that I hope to influence," he says.

"For us, as legislators, one thing we can control is our behavior toward one another. We need to be very cognizant of that, on the floor and in private conversations, because maintaining [public] respect for the legislature is largely dependent upon our own behavior."

## A FAST RISE TO LEADERSHIP

In Nebraska's term-limited Legislature, leadership comes quickly. Only four years ago, Arch was a new legislator himself, elected after running for public office for the first time in his life.

"It took me a long time from when I was first asked to get to a place where I finally decided to do it," he says.

"Ultimately, I saw it as a great platform to do even more for people.

"And I've never regretted that decision."

Though a political novice at the time, Arch jokes that a long career in health care administration was an ideal training ground for work in the legislative arena.

"You've got a number of people who

## BIO-SKETCH: NEBRASKA SEN. JOHN ARCH

- ✓ unanimously chosen speaker in early 2023 by his legislative peers; first elected to the Legislature in 2018
- ✓ previously served as chair of the Unicameral Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee
- ✓ worked for 34 years in health care administration, including as executive vice president and director of the health care division of Boys Town
- ✓ married to wife, Brenda, for more than 44 years; they have two children, Cameron and Nicholas, and five grandchildren

are well-educated, strongly opinionated, independent thinkers — and you need to somehow get them to form as a team and move forward," Arch says.

And that's how he describes his experiences as a health care executive.

Arch served as executive vice president of health care and director of the National Research Hospital and Clinics at Boys Town, the famed Nebraska organization founded more than 100 years ago as an orphanage by Father Edward Flanagan that today provides an array of services to at-risk youths and families.

Not surprisingly, soon after joining the Legislature, Arch gravitated toward a leadership role in health care — for example, helping turn temporary, COVID-19-related rules into permanent laws that expanded access to telehealth services.

He became chair of the Unicameral Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee in his first term as a senator, and now starts his second as speaker.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Arch shared his views on leadership and effective legislating. Here are excerpts.

**Q** In your experience, what are the components that allow a legislature and its members to work at their best?

**A** In my mind, there are two. One is that we need to commit to understanding the issues. Sometimes we jump too fast to the solution, and so we end up debating a solution, which we don't agree on, before really understanding the [underlying] issues together. There are lot of things we can agree on if we take the time.

The second component, I would say, is relationships. We have to move beyond just talking about what we agree or disagree on. When you understand the other person, and you see [him or her] as someone who has a family, has fears and anxieties, has hopes and dreams, you will find a way to sit down and talk to the person, and not about the person.

*"Find a way to sit down and talk to the person, and not about the person."*

**Q** Is there a specific example or two where you've seen the Nebraska Legislature working well in those ways?

**A** I'd say our work on telehealth was one. When COVID hit, some of the rules in our state were set aside and waived for a period of time, and then we saw what could happen with these different regulations in place.

So we took time to see what should be kept after COVID. What had worked well? We spent the interim bringing all the parties together, understanding the perspective of providers and insurance companies and patients.

What we found was that telehealth lent itself very well to mental and behavioral health care. A large part of our state is rural, and many people have to drive a long way to get care.

In the end, we were able to come to agreement on a bill that we believe not only improves access to care, but maybe even saves lives when people are in crisis.

**Q** What advice do you give to newer legislators, based on what you've learned about the legislative process?

**A** It really comes down to one word: listen.

There is so much to learn when you come to the Legislature, so many issues. It's hard to take it all in. If you listen, you have a better chance of making good, reasoned judgments on what comes before you.

Listen carefully in those committee hearings. Listen to the opposing views. Be a good student, and you will become a much better legislator. I hope that's



what people would say about how I have approached being a legislator.

**Q** How did your professional career in health care leadership and at Boys Town prepare you for the Legislature?

**A** It was a huge help, because after 27 years with Boys Town, I at least understood some of the policy implications in areas like child welfare and juvenile justice and health care. You're learning so much when you first get here, so having any kind of head start on some policy pieces is a benefit.

**Q** What did you learn about the role of state government through helping the children and families you served at Boys Town?

**A** On the health care side, the government has the ability to set up systems in the state to support people who want to do the work. That's a lot of what we tried to do with the new law on telehealth.

Then there are the people in the United States who truly struggle to care for themselves because of where they are in life. I think back to Father Flanagan, when he came to Omaha, he found children on the street living in cardboard boxes.

Nobody wants to live in a society like that.

So how do we help those who cannot help themselves? I certainly look at children that way. The state government can play a very meaningful role in helping those who are unable to care for themselves. That's where I focus a lot of my attention.