

# PROFILE: ILLINOIS HOUSE MAJORITY LEADER ROBYN GABEL



‘Always think of the long game’: She shares her perspective on legislating, helping lead a diverse caucus, and leaving a legacy through policy and constituent services

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For Robyn Gabel, the satisfaction of legislative service can come from helping one person at a time, or close to 13 million people all at once.

Either way, the Illinois lawmaker says, she’s thankful to be a part of it.

Through her district office in the Chicago suburb of Evanston, she and her staff help constituents cut through bureaucratic red tape and access services during the “most desperate, difficult times” of their lives.

In Springfield, there’s the opportunity to work on a single law that expands health access, improves economic opportunity or provides new environmental protections across the entire state.

“Both aspects of the job are really rewarding,” she says.

Gabel joined the Illinois General Assembly more than a decade ago, already a familiar face in Springfield at the time for her advocacy, leadership and policy successes as the longtime executive director of the Illinois Maternal and Child Coalition.

As a legislator, she soon earned the moniker “Able Gabel,” someone known for her thoughtful approach to policy and ability to get legislation to the finish line.

In early 2023, she was named to one of her home state’s top legislative posts: House majority leader. In an interview with CSG Midwest, Gabel discussed her views on leadership and some of her most valued legislative accomplishments. Here are excerpts, with questions and answers lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

**Q** What have you observed or learned about effective leadership?

**A** Our new speaker, Emanuel “Chris” Welch, is truly one of the most caring and skilled leaders I’ve worked with. We talk a lot about effective legislative leadership, and spend a lot of time training all members of the body to become good community leaders.

I can summarize this in a couple of ways. One, legislative leaders need to be able to actively listen to their members. Two, don’t make assumptions. Ask questions, listen actively and respond.

Another thing is we don’t take things personally. You learn how to disagree without being disagreeable, and move on and not become personally insulted.

**Q** How would you describe the process for developing a strategy for the entire caucus and then keeping to it?



## BIO-SKETCH: ILLINOIS REP. ROBYN GABEL

- ✓ became House majority leader in 2023; had been assistant leader
- ✓ appointed to the House in 2010 and won election that same year
- ✓ served 22 years as executive director of the Illinois Maternal and Child Health Coalition
- ✓ is a 2011 graduate of The Council of State Governments’ Henry Toll Fellowship leadership program; also served as chair of CSG’s Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Legislative Caucus
- ✓ lives in Chicago suburb of Evanston; is married with one daughter and one grandchild

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**A** We always think of the long game and our goal of making the world a better place. We know that sometimes you need to change your strategy, but keep the long game in mind. We also really work on being kind and careful with our words. Don’t overpromise, and don’t say things that you haven’t thought through.

**Q** Your caucus has 77 members. How do you keep members of such a large caucus connected with each other?

**A** What unites us is our willingness to partner together, and always understand that individual members have individual and local interests.

One of the ways that we have managed these interests is by forming working groups on a variety of topics, including gun safety, the right to choose, the environment and energy.

These groups bring voices together from all sides of our caucus to give them a safe space to speak their minds and find common ground. This has been very successful. They have been able to come up with legislation that has passed, and they have provided guidance on how we can proceed on some controversial issues. We’re going to continue using that working-group model.

**Q** You serve as co-chair of the bicameral, bipartisan Medicaid Working Group. Has that been a way to build bipartisan working relationships?

**A** [It] is a great example of bipartisanship. Having all four caucuses on this group gives us an opportunity to understand all the interests in the state. We review legislation and issues brought to us by our members and interest groups. We discuss the issues thoroughly. Then, together, we decide which of these priorities we can fund every year.

**Q** For many years, you have been a leader in Illinois on health policy, particularly maternal and child health. What are the biggest challenges in your state right now?

**A** Most recently, I’ve been very surprised, shocked and dismayed that maternal and infant mortality rates are going up. For all the years that I’ve been working on this, rates had been going down. This is very discouraging, and in talking to professionals and advocates in the field about why, they say the issues are both mental health and substance abuse among pregnant women. Those are two issues that we need to address.

**Q** Are there policy advances that have been made?

**A** In the past, some of the things I have worked on to improve maternal and child health include legalizing midwives. People who used midwives for home births were often afraid to call an ambulance or go to a hospital [in cases of emergencies] because of the mistreatment and

concern that their midwife would be arrested and jailed. For us, it was very important that this group of providers had a path to be legal in the state.

The other thing was to expand Medicaid eligibility for pregnant women up to a year post-partum.

**Q** You have taken the lead on many bills. Do any stand out to you as an especially important achievement?

**A** For me, the passage of CEJA (the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act of 2021) was really an amazing feat. First, it was the process, which was not led by the utilities. It was really the community groups, legislators and the governor’s office that developed this 900-page bill.

This legislation puts Illinois on the path to 100 percent renewable energy by 2050, and it has standards and goals along the way to make sure we meet this goal.

CEJA creates new workforce development opportunities, too. As we phase out coal and gas, we needed to help the current workforce, and we have new programs to prepare these workers as we transition to a clean-energy economy. We’re also making sure that communities that have suffered in the past from coal, gas and carbon emissions are put front and center in creating a new workforce and economy. CEJA also protects consumers, with our strongest-ever ethics requirements and oversight of utilities.

And it will put 1 million electric vehicles on the road by 2030. ...

It was an incredibly comprehensive bill that took us many months, and I’m glad that we were finally able to come to agreement.