



PROFILE: KANSAS HOUSE SPEAKER DANIEL HAWKINS

One of the state's top political leaders reflects on his lifelong, but unexpected, path to the Legislature — from dairy farm, to military service, to Topeka

by Laura Kliewer (lkiewer@csg.org)

Work hard. Learn the rules and follow the process. Commit to serving others.

They sound like ingredients for success in the legislative arena, and Kansas Speaker Daniel Hawkins says he was fortunate to have learned each of them even before thinking about running for office.

He points to three experiences, in particular, that prepared him not only for legislative service, but also the chance to rise quickly in leadership.

First, as a child, Hawkins spent much of his time on his grandfather's dairy farm, working from sunup to sundown and building an appreciation for family and the value of hard work. Hawkins jokes that he also developed a lifelong sleeping pattern sometimes at odds with his friends in the Legislature.

"If you want to get ahead of me, you can send me a text at 11 o'clock at night — but I'm going to return it at 4 in the morning," he says.

The second experience: Twelve years of service in the Kansas Army National Guard, which demanded a strong work ethic and instilled in Hawkins the kind of skills and mindset that would help any legislator succeed.

"The military is very regimented; they do things a certain way," he says. "And the legislature is very regimented in our processes as well. Those who can learn the process have a leg up, as well as those who learn the rules."

Lastly, Hawkins has had decades of experience in successfully building and running his own insurance business, one focused on employee benefits.

"Every single client wants something different, and you need to be able to work with them to get them what they want," he says. "And that is the same as what we are doing here [in the Legislature]; we're helping people get what they need."

Now in his 11th year as a legislator, and second as House speaker, Hawkins recently spoke with CSG Midwest about his views on leadership and the policy challenges that lie ahead for his home state of Kansas. Here are excerpts, with questions and answers lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Q How did you first become interested in politics?

A I had paid attention to some politics, but not a lot. In 2006, our then-governor, Kathleen Sebelius, decided to try and bring universal health care to Kansas. It wasn't something that I thought Kansans really wanted



BIO-SKETCH: KANSAS REP. DANIEL HAWKINS

- ✓ elected speaker of the House prior to the 2023 session
- ✓ served as majority leader from 2019 to 2022; first elected to the House in 2012
- ✓ served 12 years in the Kansas Army National Guard
- ✓ married to his college sweetheart, Diane; they have two daughters and two grandchildren
- ✓ longtime business owner who still works in the insurance industry in his hometown of Wichita
- ✓ has a bachelor's degree in marketing from Emporia State University

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to do, and I became very active in the association that I belong to about making sure we educate the governor and others on what we have and why universal health care may not be the best idea. We ended up being successful.

During that time, I spent a lot of time talking with [legislators] and educating them on what this would do, what would be the end result.

So that work really got me interested in the Legislature.

Q You've spoken about the importance of your time in the military as helping shape your outlook on legislative service. What lessons did you take away from your military bosses?

A Probably the thing that I learned from them the most is that in the military, you are trying to build a team. And you don't get a choice of who you get — you get who they send you. You then have to learn how to mold those individuals into a team.

It's the same way with our Legislature. I don't get to pick who comes here. Each district elects a representative and each member comes here with different experiences, different wants, different desires, different self-interests. They come in with their particular life experiences, and you have to mold all those people into a team, to where you can get things done.

Q Conversely, what are some of the unique aspects of leading in a legislative setting,

compared to the military or most other environments?

A For one, I can't fire a single person. The voters can fire them, but we can't. ... So we have to figure out how to make things work, how to get those who may not agree with us to come to the table and sit down and talk. Then we can figure out what it is going to take to get things done.

Q With that said, what do you consider to be the most important qualities of a legislative leader?

A To get things done, you have to listen more than talk. You have to sit there and maybe have someone tell you something you don't agree with — you may not even like — to try and understand why they are saying what they are saying. Because there is a reason for it. It is important to them.

If you will listen enough, ask a few questions and get an understanding of where the person is coming from, you can find a way to meld things together.

If you never do that, you won't get 84 or 85 people working together. You just never do. So really, it's about building relationships and listening.

Q What piece of advice do you tend to give to newer members?

A I always tell freshmen when they come in, "You know, you can be one person with one vote, or you can be one person with 20 votes because you

have built a coalition of people of like mind who will get things done."

I'll take the guy who can get 20 over the guy who can get one any day.

Q What are two or three of the most important challenges you think your state will be facing and needs to address over the next 10 years?

A I'm going to start off with water, because water is absolutely an issue no matter where you are in the United States. For Kansas, the western side of the state is primarily agricultural and depends on water for irrigation and to grow the crops. It's extremely important out there. And then if you live on the eastern side of the state, where the majority of the population is, water is coming from lakes and from some aquifers. And those lakes are all silting in.

We formed a water committee. I have some fantastic people who are working on it. They are very passionate about solving the water [sustainability] problems with some voluntary conservation methods and various other approaches. So water is definitely the No. 1 issue.

The other issue is making sure we do everything we can to bring people into this state and have the workers. We have lots and lots of jobs, and now we're really starting to work to make sure our kids stay in the state and fill those jobs. So the workforce is going to continue to be an issue.

Third is probably child care, because it has a lot to do with workforce participation.