



## PROFILE: KANSAS SENATE MINORITY LEADER DINAH SYKES

Her political journey began as a PTA president and parent advocate; Sykes' time in office has taught her the value of storytelling and open dialogue as legislative tools

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

**D**inah Sykes' path to the Kansas Legislature started with some really long walks as president of her local PTA.

To raise awareness about the needs of schools and role of state funding, she would travel on foot more than 60 miles from the Kansas City suburb of Merriam to the state capital of Topeka.

"The second year that we did it, I was at a press conference and it was actually then-Senator Laura Kelly [now the governor] speaking, and she said, 'We need more people who are involved in their community to step up and lead,'" Sykes recalls.

Should I be one of those people? she asked herself.

Soon after those walks, and the words of Kelly and others, Sykes was running in 2016 for a seat in the Kansas Senate, as a Republican. Fast forward to today, and Sykes is a top legislative leader, as a Democrat.

She switched parties in the middle of her first four-year term due to disagreements over tax policy and other issues. It left Sykes without a political home at the start of the 2019 session, no longer a Republican and now in a party that she had run against three years earlier.

"Here I am, the black sheep, not knowing where I fit in," she says, "and there is this piece of legislation that I'm working really hard on and that I think could make a really big difference in people's lives."

### A BILL AND THE STORIES BEHIND IT

The goal of her bill was to strengthen housing protections for the survivors of domestic violence. It faced potential opposition because of proposed new restrictions on evictions and limits on the fees that landlords could charge to victims seeking to break a rental lease.

Despite the obstacles, Sykes was able to get SB 78 to the governor's desk for signing. To this day, she holds close some of the legislative lessons from that experience.

First, tell a story.

The power of storytelling, Sykes says, can bring people to your side, regardless of party or differences on other issues. With SB 78, for example, the voices of the survivors of abuse needed to be heard. Sykes told their stories of trauma in one-on-one conversations with fellow legislators, and explained how a new state law could be a lifesaver.

The second lesson: Keep an open mind and commit to open dialogue with legislative colleagues.

After her switch in parties, some old legislative allies were going to be new



### BIO-SKETCH: KANSAS SENATOR DINAH SYKES

- ✓ has served as Senate Democratic leader since 2020, the first woman in state history to hold the position; first elected to the Kansas Senate in 2016
- ✓ has long been an active member of her community, serving as a PTA treasurer and president, as well as on the Kansas Children's Cabinet
- ✓ previously ran her own business as a personal chef and also worked as a development officer in higher education
- ✓ lives in town of Lenexa with husband, Jeffrey; and their sons, William and Tyler
- ✓ is a 2017 graduate of CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development

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rivals come election time. They wanted to unseat her. But some of those same people became early, and important, backers of SB 78 — after hearing from Sykes and the story she told.

"It helps to start with the idea that all legislators want to make life better for our constituents," Sykes says. "Of course we're going to disagree [on how], but starting from there helps."

Sykes became the leader of the Senate Democratic Caucus after the 2020 elections. She was re-elected by her peers to the same position ahead of the 2025 session.

**Q** How would you describe your approach to leading a minority caucus in a legislature where the majority, the Republican Party, has a sizable seat advantage?

**A** We make it clear that there are values that we will always stand for, but at the same time, we want to show that we can work with the other side of the aisle — not just throwing political bombs out there.

So we try to have a plan of attack and an order of operation.

For one, there are many times where you don't need all of your members standing up in opposition to the same bill or resolution. If you keep hounding and adding four or five hours to everyone's day, you're not making friends. So have a plan as a caucus.

We also don't want our story as a caucus to always be "no."

We want to show that there is a path for us to compromise, to show what is possible on our side of the aisle.

Sometimes it happens, sometimes it doesn't. But it's that story you tell — the words you say on the floor, the manner in which you do it, the kinds of amendments you propose to a bill or a resolution.

**Q** How do you maintain good relations knowing public disagreements between partisan caucuses are inevitable?

**A** All of us as legislators can help by sharing with each other the stories of our constituents and our district. Or even traveling around the state to each other's districts.

A few years back, the Senate president and I traveled the state when we were looking at redistricting. And I remember before [those trips] that he always was saying, "I don't understand why you vote the way that you do." But he came to my district, and there were probably 200 or 300 people there, and afterward he said, "I understand you a little more, and God bless you for representing these people."

I've had the same experience on travels across the state. You get out of your bubble. For me, that's been going to our rural communities, to places in western Kansas, for example, where some whole school districts are smaller than my kids' homeroom class.

You have conversations in different parts of the state and come away with a greater understanding, appreciation, of the people representing them. It's helped me become a stronger legislator.

**Q** What are some of the lessons about being a legislator that

you learned from others that you now try to pass on?

**A** One of them is to learn to pick your battles. I remember coming in as a freshman and being upset about a number of the appointments that the governor had made and that we were being asked to confirm [in the Senate]. I thought many of them were not really qualified and I was mad — I wanted to vote "no" on all of them.

But I talked to others who said, "If you vote 'no' on all of these, what point are you making? Is it really helping the cause?"

Instead, they suggested to me that I really dig in and take a closer look. Don't make a general assumption. Then, if you still find someone is really unqualified, fine. But it was a lesson in learning to be more strategic and thoughtful.

**Q** What are the aspects about being a legislator that you find most valuable or rewarding?

**A** You can really affect people's lives — removing barriers or helping them in some other real, tangible way. On the housing protection law (for domestic abuse survivors), I heard from someone who said, "I thought it was good policy and I supported it, but I never thought it would affect me directly, but it did." The family had a niece that was able to get out of a [violent] situation because of that law.

So you might not always see it or feel it when you're voting on a law, but then there are times later on where you hear about how much it really had an impact.