

Illinois Sen. Elgie Sims Jr.

From legislative staff to lawyering to the Legislature, Sims aims to serve his community and, now, the Midwestern Legislative Conference

by Jon Davis (jdavis@csg.org)

Elgie Sims Jr., didn't plan for his public service to be as an elected official. After graduating from Illinois State University, he went to work in the General Assembly on the staff of then-Senate President Emil Jones, eventually becoming director of appropriations.

"I figured I'd spent 10 years on the staff," he recalls. "I left, went to law school, and started practicing law. I figured I'd be practicing law and helping out my community by doing things related to that."

But after earning his law degree from Loyola University of Chicago in 2007, and opening his own law firm one year later, Sims saw an opportunity in 2010 to serve his community (the Chatham neighborhood on Chicago's South Side) by running for the Cook County Board.

Sims ran for the Illinois House in 2012, winning a five-candidate primary election and then taking the general election with all but 129 votes. He served there until January, when he was picked to replace retiring state Sen. Donne Trotter.

Sims also has long been active in The Council of State Governments' Midwestern Legislative Conference, and this summer, the region's legislators elected him to be MLC chair in 2018.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Sims discussed what motivated him to enter the General Assembly and what he hopes to accomplish as MLC chair.

Q: What got you interested in public service, and in becoming a state legislator?

A: Seeing the ability to impact my community is really what drove me. I wanted to really get out there and make a change in the community, so I ran for the County Board. I wasn't successful, but that didn't stop me. I stayed out there and continued to work in the community, doing the things I'd been doing — helping raise money for scholarships for kids and buying books for needy children — and, eventually, I ran for the Illinois House.

My predecessor in the Illinois House said she was going to retire after a long, distinguished career. Having worked in Springfield before, I knew the issues, I knew the landscape.

It would be a way for me to really get involved and make a difference at the grassroots level in a number of areas: education, criminal justice reform, job creation, economic development. I knew I could do that from the state legislature, so when that opportunity came about, I ran, and I was successful.

Q: What was that moment when you decided, "Yeah, I could be a legislator ... I can do this"?

A: When I saw the opportunity to help my community and make a difference in education policy. It's one of those issues that I personally advocated for and worked on for a number of

Bio-sketch of Illinois Sen. Elgie Sims, Jr.

- ✓ elected to Illinois House in 2012; appointed to state Senate in 2018
- ✓ serves as vice chair of Senate Judiciary Committee
- ✓ 2014 graduate of CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development; 2015 graduate of CSG's Henry Toll Fellowship Program
- ✓ serves as first vice chair of CSG's Midwestern Legislative Conference; will serve as MLC chair in 2018 and will lead Illinois as it hosts 2019 MLC Annual Meeting in Chicago
- ✓ he and his wife, Shivonne, have two daughters



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years; even when I was in undergraduate school, I wrote my senior thesis on the inequities in Illinois' education funding formula. So it was an area where I knew it needed reform. It needed individuals who understood the process, who understood what the outcomes should be — which is an education that was fair for all children, equitable for all children, irrespective of where they lived or what their familial status was.

Q: What are some of the areas that you plan to focus on as chair of the MLC?

A: I am committed to making sure we're investing in the next generation of leaders; that we are making sure that we're preparing today's students for the challenges that they'll see ahead; and that we're investing in the workforce of today to prepare them for the jobs and opportunities of tomorrow.

One of the issues that we worked on when I was co-chair of the MLC Economic Development Committee was preparing young people and retooling not just young people, but retooling all individuals to make sure we're preparing them for the economy that's coming, not just the economy we have. ... So as we look at economic development, how do we invest in our workforce today so that it is prepared as our economy continues to change?

Q: Have you identified any particular points you want to look at, or do you seek more of a general, regionwide discussion on that subject of workforce "retooling" and preparedness?

A: Some of the work I've done legislatively is to make sure we've modernized Illinois'

education curriculum to help prepare students for the work that's coming. While we want everybody to get a high-quality education, we want to make sure that we recognize that not everybody is going to go to college.

So how do we modernize our curriculum to ensure that, if you're not going to go into a four-year liberal arts education, other alternatives are out there? What else would you be going to? What else would you be doing? We're going to have experts come in who can talk to us about those topics, but also talk to us about what employers are looking for.

Q: As part of your emphasis on investing in the next generation of leaders, you've mentioned the importance of raising civic engagement. What might that entail?

A: We've got some programs here in Illinois and the Chicago area that really talk about showing our young people what government is, and what government is not. And by "what government is not," I mean getting them away from the sensational news that they hear every day, wherever they get their news from, getting them away from the sensational to get them to understand exactly what government really does and how it impacts individuals' lives.

We have so many young people who want to be part of the change; they want to affect the government around them. They want to affect their community. And sometimes they just don't know how, so we want to make sure we're engaging those young people in that discussion, so they really can be a part of the future of our governments.