Jean Breaux has been serving in the Indiana Senate since 2006, and she’s been around state and local politics much longer than that — thanks to the leadership of and example set by her mother, Billie. Billie served in the state Senate for a decade and a half (Jean immediately succeeded her in office), and was an important leader on civil rights in Indianapolis as well as president of the city’s teachers union.

On her mother’s many travels, Jean would come along, sometimes stepping in for her mother at meetings and speaking on her behalf.

“Before you know it, it just becomes a part of you,” Jean Breaux says of politics and community involvement.

She began her own career in human resources, eventually working for the state of Indiana on economic development issues, including on policies to help retain and attract businesses.

Breaux’s personal and professional background helped prepare her for the job of state senator, which she describes as requiring the ability to think creatively about policymaking, to be able to work well with others, and to be committed to solving problems.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Sen. Breaux shared her perspective on serving in the minority (she is a Democrat in a state with a Republican governor and a GOP-led legislature), on legislative leadership, and on Indiana’s big policy challenges and opportunities.

Here are excerpts.

Q: How would you describe your leadership style as a legislator?
A: I follow some advice my mother gave me about the importance of surrounding myself with competent people. Then I give them timelines, check in periodically and let them do their jobs. I let people know what my expectations are, give them the tools to be successful, and step in when I need to. I especially love to encourage and develop the young staff that works with me.

Q: What are one or two pieces of legislation that you were particularly proud of helping get signed into law?
A: In 2019 I authored a bill to allow pregnancy services under Medicaid to cover the cost of a doula [birthing coach]. Indiana has had an abysmal infant mortality rate, and this law makes the services of doulas available to women who receive health care through the Medicaid system. With bipartisan support, including health committee chairs in both chambers, the legislation passed but was not funded. Our Families and Social Services Administration has been working on guidelines for the program, after which I hope to get all the funding in place. In 2017, I had a family tell me that they could not get health records for their disabled (adult) child after the child died. I authored a bill that gives a parent/guardian access to health records for a specific amount of time after the death of an incapacitated person in order to resolve any payment or other outstanding issues.

Q: How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your work as a legislator? Has it changed your perspective in any way?
A: Yes, surprisingly, it has changed my perspective. COVID has exposed so many inequities in the system. I feel like I have a greater burden to speak for the minority community. I haven’t always been like that, but the pandemic has done it.

Q: Looking ahead to the 2021 session, what issues do you believe are most important for the legislature to tackle and why?
A: COVID has shown that there are great racial disparities, including in health care. Indiana needs a stronger public health system. I hope we will look at public health spending overall, as well as how much goes to low-income communities and communities of color, and in what way. Some early interventions would save the state money.

Criminal justice reform is also an important issue; we need a paradigm change as we mete out justice. The Indiana Black Legislative Caucus will be offering a package of bills to do this, and I am the lead on a proposal to move some money from police discretionary funds (from forfeiture of assets and other sources) and spend these funds in communities that are most affected by crime and economic hardship.

We also need to work on the public education system, including the funding formula, teacher salaries and equity in poorer communities.

Q: How do you go about convincing other legislators, not in the Indiana Black Legislative Caucus, to consider its legislative priorities?
A: A lot of it has to do with educating colleagues and making sure that they understand the costs and benefits of certain policies.

Q: What do you see as some of the biggest challenges and opportunities ahead for the state of Indiana?
A: Our redistricting process is very partisan. We need to have an impartial group who will make district lines based on fairness and not politics. Indiana’s public health system ranks very low, and we have to improve public health outcomes. We also should improve our public education system and make funding more equitable and stable.

Indianapolis native learned early on the value of public service; now, she hopes to lead legislative efforts that bolster public health and help hard-hit communities

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