



## Iowa Rep. Joel Fry

Respected voice on health, human services issues in state will take on new legislative leadership role during 2016 session

by Ilene Grossman ([igrossman@csg.org](mailto:igrossman@csg.org))

To Iowa Rep. Joel Fry, faith and politics are closely linked, and he traces the personal connection back to a very young age and the frequent discussions that his family had around the dinner table.

“Two topics that are often avoided in our culture,” he recalls, “were very open in conversation in our home life.”

Faith has always been fundamental to Fry’s life, and politics became a much bigger part of it when he decided to seek a seat in the Iowa House in 2010.

A mix of economic and social issues convinced Fry to run, and once elected, he emerged as a leader on issues related to Iowa’s health and human services systems. He helped with a reform of the mental health system, for example, and sponsored a bipartisan bill to improve the state’s response to reports of child abuse.

Fry’s leadership on health and human services is a natural fit considering his life and career outside the Legislature. A social worker, Fry lectures across the country on topics related to end-of-life decisions and marriage, teaches college courses, and is a member of the faculty for the National Hospice and Palliative Care Association’s manager-development program.

For 10 years, too, through their TEAM Restoration Ministries, he and his wife, Heather, have partnered with local churches to provide therapy services to couples and families. They also have nine children between the ages of 4 and 19, five of whom were adopted from Ethiopia.

“I don’t have to live in Des Moines during session,” Fry says, “and because I am able to be at home, I get to be a daddy first and foremost.”

This coming session, he will have even more legislative duties. In August, the Iowa House Republican Caucus elected Fry to be its majority whip. He previously served as assistant majority leader.

Fry recently talked about his views on leadership and his priorities for the coming year with CSG Midwest. Here are excerpts from the interview.

**Q: Soon after joining the Iowa House, you pursued a role in leadership. What recommendations would you make to other legislators who want to pursue a similar path?**

**A:** As I have shared with some of our newer members, they have to decide if policy and budget is their forte, or if the leadership skill set of the caucus is where they are gifted and talented. My skill set lies more in the side of being able to bring people along, create consensus and find common ground.

As a trained social worker, one of the skill sets that is driven into our heads is to listen, and to

communicate and to hear what the other person is saying. I believe that is important in any leadership position but, most importantly, in political leadership. If we are not listening, if we are not in touch with our constituency base, including the caucus, then more leaders fail than rise.

So I would encourage new members to figure out if they have the desire to bring along a team, to rally them, and to decide if they can withstand the pressure in those moments when they do things wrong. Every leader will fail, so do you have the humility and ability to be able to take the tough knocks and come back?

**Q: How would you describe your legislative leadership style?**

**A:** There are three pieces to my legislative leadership style: listen, learn and lead.

I’ve already talked about listening, and learning means that I am willing to find out things that I don’t know, and I may even be willing to shift my perspective as I learn from a conversation. And then, we can begin to lead, but only after having gained the perspective of those who are following. If we miss that perspective, we can’t lead effectively.

The other piece is what I call servant leadership — I am here to lead, but also that I am there to provide whatever you may need.

So one of the areas I am excited to focus on in our caucus in my new whip position is to think about how the gifts and talents of each individual member can be brought in and allow them to participate, rather than keeping it a closed, only-leadership experience.

**Q: What are some of the qualities and characteristics to being an effective legislative leader?**

**A:** One of the greatest things that I have learned and heard from our current speaker, Kraig Paulsen, is that “I am going to make this decision for the sake of the institution, or for the protection of the institution for those who will come after me.”

I believe it is incredibly important for us as legislators to, yes, get caught up in the here and now, but to remember that there are generations coming after us. If we compromise the institution, if we compromise the civility and the discourse, the opportunity to publicly discuss and disagree, we’ve lost some of our foundational principles.

**Q: You bring a varied set of experiences to the Legislature — as a social worker, as someone who has spent years working in hospice settings, as someone who has worked in a group home for juveniles, as an end-of-life counselor and teacher,**

### Bio-sketch of Iowa Rep. Fry

- ✓ Elected majority whip in Iowa House this summer; previously served as assistant majority leader
- ✓ Licensed independent social worker
- ✓ Teacher and lecturer on end-of-life and family issues
- ✓ He and his wife, Heather, have nine children, including five who were adopted from Ethiopia, and run Team Restoration Ministries, an organization that partners with local churches to provide therapy services to couples and families.

**and as an adoptive and foster parent. How have all of these experiences informed your work in the Capitol?**

**A:** I believe that all of those experiences allow me to come in and better understand what constituents are expressing when they connect with the Department of Human Services system.

Through my work in health care, I have an understanding of the health care system and the changes of the last several years, and I have a perspective on what that patient feels like, waiting in a doctor’s office or at the end of life.

In all aspects of my life, I am required to listen. My experience allows me to sit with legislators and have them confront, be angry, be passionate or excited. They will ask me to be that person whom they can bounce something off of and get an objective opinion.

**Q: What are your legislative priorities for 2016 and beyond?**

**A:** Managed care has now taken over our state Medicaid population, and it will be important to me to be monitoring and watching to make sure our managed-care contracts are going as expected and that those who receive services are getting the services they would expect out of our Medicaid system.

Mental health reform will continue to be important because we are just seeing those changes roll out and become regionalized, so we will be looking for any holes we need to deal with so that mental health equity is provided across the state.

As for our House leadership, we will continue to maintain our budget principles — we won’t spend more than we take in, we won’t balance the budget using one-time money, and we won’t start a program that we can’t sustain over time.

We will also have a conversation about education [the governor vetoed \$55 million in additional education funding for the 2015-2016 school year passed by the Legislature], and we will come back to look at what schools are needing. ★

“If we compromise the institution, if we compromise the civility and the discourse, the opportunity to publicly discuss and disagree, we’ve lost some of our foundational principles.”