



# Ohio Rep. Tracy Maxwell Heard

House minority leader has made criminal-justice issues a top priority, shepherding bills related to sentencing and sanctions

by Kate Tormey ([ktormey@csg.org](mailto:ktormey@csg.org))

When Rep. Tracy Maxwell Heard was in her first term in the Ohio House, she remembers the emotional speeches given by outgoing lawmakers at the end of session.

At the time, she was surprised to see grown men crying on the floor of the legislature. But now that she's served seven years, it doesn't seem strange at all.

"It didn't take me long to realize how unique and how special this opportunity really is," says the Democrat and current minority leader. "And how connected you become and how much you care about the impact you are having."

In fact, when it's her turn to say goodbye, she plans to post her farewell speech on YouTube, because she's sure she will be too emotional to get through it in person.

## Strong connection to community

Though she has served her community and the state in many ways, Heard's legislative seat is her first elected position.

Her career began in broadcast journalism, as an anchor for a local ABC affiliate. In 1996, she brought her communications skills to the Clinton-Gore presidential re-election campaign, and that experience led to a position as a legislative staffer in the Ohio Senate. She later went on to serve as executive director for a community development corporation in her district.

"That's when I started to recognize the connection between government and communities," she says. "And I became interested in running for office."

Heard decided to challenge a newly elected incumbent in 2006, and during her campaign, she sat down with community organizations to develop a platform of local priorities. And ever since then she has kept her constituents at the heart of her legislative work, attending every local event that she can.

"People are always saying, 'We're so glad you made it and worked us into your schedule.' And I reply, 'You are my schedule. I work for you. You should be surprised if I don't show up!'" she says.

And now that she is House minority leader, she is also focused on issues of concern to the state as a whole. For example, she has led her caucus through issues such as regulating hydraulic fracturing ("fracking"), funding education, combating a heroin epidemic and expanding Medicaid.

Meanwhile, she has also tried to be a legislative leader who models cooperation and bipartisanship, which she says isn't always easy in today's

politics-driven climate.

"If we were in the private sector, we would all have been fired a long time ago — from the state legislature all the way to D.C. — because we are not taking care of our 'company,'" Heard says. "There are things we are simply not tending to because we can't work together."

In hopes of being a positive role model, especially for young women, Heard launched Girl Power, an initiative that helps encourage females to advocate for issues they believe in, get involved in their communities or run for office themselves.

Here are some excerpts from an interview that CSG Midwest conducted with Heard last month.

**Q: During your legislative career, you have worked on various criminal-justice issues, including sentencing reform. Can you talk about the bill you passed in 2011?**

**A:** It's all about giving more discretion to judges: giving them the opportunity to refer people to treatment or community-based facilities and making use of resources other than sending people to prison, especially for first-time offenders. And as judges take advantage of that opportunity and discretion, we are tracking it so we are supporting those community-based facilities and treatment programs and they are able to serve people who are being diverted [from prison].

**Q: You are also very passionate about eliminating "collateral sanctions" that ex-offenders face when they return to society from the corrections system. What have you accomplished in Ohio?**

**A:** We are working with businesses that are making a commitment to offer opportunities to returning citizens. We are also looking at issues of housing and employment, because if you don't remove those sanctions, [ex-offenders] are kind of blocked in. So they go back to what they were doing and they go back to jail, or they end up using again, and whatever opportunity there was for them to be restored is lost.

I am also really pleased with the work we did on [professional] licensing. For example, if your offense didn't have anything to do with what you are trying to get a license in, there is no prohibition [on getting one]. If you are trying to get into the financial industry and you were convicted of embezzling, that's not going to happen. ... [But] there are very specific connections between your offense and the licenses it would exclude you from. There is no reason to exclude someone from

everything because they have a record.

We're trying to build up community supports so people have an opportunity at successful reintegration: for people to come back, get jobs, reconnect with their families and become contributing, positive, tax-paying members of our society. But we had these sanctions that were absolutely preventing them from ever doing that.

**Q: You are hopeful that legislation you're sponsoring this year regarding credit unions will pass. What would it do?**

**A:** It opens up the opportunities for credit unions to hold state deposits. It makes them more viable and able to better support their communities. It won't affect all credit unions, because you have to be at a certain level to accept those deposits. The banking industry is absolutely against it, but it's really not taking any business away from them. ... Credit unions have not been able to hold state deposits, and we are responding to small businesses and school districts that are looking for alternatives. I am really proud of the bill.

**Q: You've named education as one of the top concerns you hear from your constituents these days. What are your own goals in this area?**

**A:** When we fail in public education, we fail as a state. You're not just failing the poor kids or the minority kids. Public education is about workforce development and having a ready workforce. And it also has a huge impact when we are trying to attract industry here; education and the rating of your public school system is one of the top things that companies look at when they are coming to an area.

And there are long-term, cumulative effects on crime statistics, health statistics and home ownership. All of those things are negatively affected when we are failing in the public education realm.

Under current leadership, we are not doing anything to fix that — we continue to do things going in the wrong direction. ... We have a directive from the Supreme Court that says we have to change our funding formula because we are totally dependent on property taxes. That is unfair and has a built-in bias because if you live in a wealthier suburb there is more money going into your district than in an impoverished urban environment. And the one thing public education should be is equal.

**Q: Because of term limits, this will be your last year in the Ohio House. What are your plans after you leave the legislature?**

**A:** What I will continue to do, even from a non-elected position, is to try to engage the electorate and make people understand how important it is for them to be involved in the process. The madness that is happening right now is happening because citizens are disengaged. I understand why they are disgusted, but in a democracy, you are in charge. ★

### Bio-sketch: Rep. Heard

- ✓ first elected to Ohio House in 2006
- ✓ currently the House minority leader
- ✓ holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Akron in communications
- ✓ serves a central Ohio district that includes parts of Columbus
- ✓ was a television anchor for an ABC news affiliate
- ✓ worked for the 1996 Clinton-Gore election campaign and as a staffer in the Ohio Senate