



# Wisconsin Sen. Sheila Harsdorf

Family farmer first ran to advocate for rural issues; more than 20 years later, goals include closing skills gap, reducing tax burden

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

**W**isconsin Sen. Sheila Harsdorf grew up in a family in which two things were part of the fabric of daily life: farming and public service.

Harsdorf was born on a farm in Minnesota, but her family moved to River Falls, Wis., when she was a teenager. In her youth, she was active in her rural community through 4-H and learned the importance of service from her father, who was on the town board.

After completing her degree in animal science at the University of Minnesota, and a short stint as an agricultural loan officer, Harsdorf returned to River Falls to fulfill her dream of farming. She joined her father and brother Jim to run the family business. Jim had been elected to the state Assembly and then the Senate, and after 11 years of service, he decided to leave the Legislature — and encouraged Sheila to consider running.

“There were many issues being decided in Madison that affected me both as a farmer and as a rural resident, but they were being decided by many who didn’t have a good understanding of what our rural communities and agriculture needed in our state,” she says.

Harsdorf was elected in 1988 and served 10 years in the Assembly. She was elected to the Senate in 2000. Since then, Harsdorf’s policy interests have expanded to include higher education, fiscal issues and combating drug abuse.

Harsdorf serves as chair of the Senate University and Technical Colleges Committee, where she has worked specifically on ways to address the gap between the skills of Wisconsin workers and the needs of the state’s businesses. Her legislative district includes two university campuses and two technical college districts.

“It really is through higher education that we provide opportunities for mobility in our society and create opportunities for our youth and citizens,” she says.

Harsdorf is also chair of the Midwestern Higher Education Compact, an alliance of states that brings together policymakers and education leaders to promote interstate cooperation.

Harsdorf’s northwestern Wisconsin district borders the Twin Cities, which she says can be a tremendous asset in terms of drawing businesses to the area. In fact, her district is one of the fastest-growing in the Senate. But she also sees some challenges to business growth. Next session, she plans to work on addressing issues ranging from education to taxes.

“How we can maximize our investment and outcomes in higher education?” she says. “We want to make sure our graduates are ready to go to work, and make [postsecondary education] affordable as well as accessible.”

Last month, CSG Midwest talked with Harsdorf about her commitment to service and leadership, as well as her policy priorities. Here is an excerpt from the interview.

## Bio-sketch: Sen. Harsdorf

- ✓ first elected to Wisconsin Assembly in 1988; served 10 years
- ✓ now serving fourth term in Senate; chair of Senate Republican Caucus
- ✓ represents northwestern Wisconsin district, along the Minnesota border
- ✓ grew up on a family dairy farm; after college, she returned to River Falls to run the farm with her dad and brother
- ✓ chair of the Senate Committee on Universities and Technical Colleges and member of the Joint Committee on Finance
- ✓ holds a degree in animal science from the University of Minnesota

**Q:** This session, you were the lead sponsor of a package of bills aimed at preventing drug abuse. Can you talk about the legislation and your reasons for supporting it?

**A:** Drug abuse is a huge issue in northwestern Wisconsin. In 2013, in [the city of] Hudson alone — which is not a large community — we lost seven young people to drug overdose. That has been an important issue that our communities and our region are trying to address. ...

I was the lead Senate sponsor on a package of bills put together by Rep. John Nygren. It was aimed at saving lives by [creating] the “Good Samaritan” law, which provides immunity from simple drug possession charges. Often when someone is using heroin, they are with a group of people — and if someone is overdosing, their friends desert them. This law encourages them to stick around and help the person.

One of the bills dealt with allowing first-responders to carry Narcan, which is very effective in countering an overdose. And we also dealt with curbing abuse of prescription drugs, because we know that is often how people start down the road of drug abuse. In addition, we passed a couple of bills dealing with treatment.

The Heroin Opiate Prevention and Education legislation will help save lives and hopefully prevent addiction. It passed with strong bipartisan support. We tend to focus on the things that are controversial, and consequently people think that we never agree — so it’s always nice to also focus on those things where there is bipartisan support.

**Q:** Your work in higher education has focused in part on the skills gap. Can you talk about your work this year to address that issue?

**A:** I was the lead sponsor on a couple of bills this past session expanding apprenticeships, both for youth and adults, and encouraging

opportunities for collaboration between businesses and our technical colleges. We put more resources into our [existing] youth apprenticeship programs to expand those opportunities. And we are working closely with businesses to find out how we can best address their workforce needs.

**Q:** One of the controversial issues in this past legislative session was legislation surrounding DNA collection by law enforcement. Can you explain the legislation?

**A:** [The new law will require] DNA collection at felony arrest rather than conviction. There is a national effort to pass this in every state — “DNA Saves,” which is led by Jayann Sepich of New Mexico, who lost her daughter to a rape and murder. At least 29 states have adopted it, as well as the federal government.

I am convinced that this is a way of saving lives, solving cold cases and minimizing future tragedies. The DNA Saves measure passed in the budget this past session. I advocated for it and had also introduced similar legislation.

*[Editor’s note: According to DNA Saves, legislation allowing law enforcement to collect DNA on a felony arrest has also been passed in Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, North Dakota and South Dakota.]*

**Q:** You have long been an advocate for rural issues; what do you think the challenges are for rural areas of the Midwest?

**A:** We have great opportunities in our rural areas, but one of the things that is so very important to maintain those opportunities is the availability of high-speed Internet. We know that is important in encouraging those coming out of school to come back to their rural communities and to agriculture.

Many of the issues affecting agriculture really are governed at the federal level, but one of the things that is important in our communities is controlling taxes and maintaining affordability — and not taxing people out of their homes and their businesses. That is why reducing the tax burden in Wisconsin is a primary focus of our efforts. ...

One of the big challenges in my district is getting access to Wisconsin news. Because of our proximity to the Twin Cities, we are in that media market. There are many parts of the district where people do not get a Wisconsin TV station, myself included.

**Q:** What is one of the top concerns your constituents are bringing to you now?

**A:** One of the issues that comes up very frequently is trying to reinstate the tax reciprocity agreement with Minnesota. That border is there on paper, but western Wisconsin and eastern Minnesota really work together as a region. That is an issue of tremendous concern to those who are impacted: not creating excessive burden for people who live in one state and work in another. ★