

Daily Whale

Q+A with Illinois House Assistant Majority Leader Sara Feigenholtz



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With the Illinois Governor's Office set to change hands, Illinois House Assistant Majority Leader Sara Feigenholtz (D-Chicago) said she is open to working with Republican Gov.-elect Bruce Rauner.

Feigenholtz added that she looks forward to helping Rauner, a political newcomer, overcome many of the challenges he faces as governor. She added that many of those challenges will be the same ones his predecessor, Gov. Pat Quinn, faced: balancing the budget and encouraging economic development.

"I think that ... we really do have to put the campaign behind us and develop trust and come up with solutions for the people of this state, because I think they're tired of the bickering," Feigenholtz said. "The public has a very low tolerance for bickering. We need to come up with solutions and roll our sleeves up and try to get to 'yes.'"

Feigenholtz told the Daily Whale that she expects Rauner to attempt to limit the role of the state government. With that in mind, she pointed to the Kennedy Forum Illinois as an example of how government can partner with the private sector to drive progress.

The Kennedy Forum Illinois is the local chapter of the Kennedy Forum on Community Mental Health, a mental health advocacy group that was founded by Patrick Kennedy, son of the late U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy. Feigenholtz is a member of the Illinois chapter's [organizing committee](#), which is made up of many

prominent figures from Chicago-area business, government, health care and philanthropy. The [forum](#) works to ensure that mental health and substance abuse issues are diagnosed and treated in a similar fashion to physical ailments. On Thursday, the Kennedy Forum Illinois will host its [launch event](#) at the Palmer House Hilton.

“Government isn’t the solution for everything,” Feigenholtz said. “We need to turn inward to the private sector and ask them to work with the public sector to collaborate.”

The Daily Whale caught up with the representative to discuss her involvement with the Kennedy Forum and what she envisions for the next era of state government. An edited version of that conversation follows.

DW: What’s on your agenda for today?

SF: I’m going to be writing some remarks for the Kennedy Forum Illinois [launch event]. It’s an amazing new initiative that affects people whose lives have essentially been touched by mental illness.

DW: Can you share with me a bit about the Kennedy Forum?

SF: [The organization is] different because you have unique business leaders and philanthropy working together. It’s powerful because people are telling their stories and stories change things. I just personally feel that after being in ... the Legislature that it’s very important to hear the human side of things. I think we gain tremendous perspective, instead of getting a 14-page document with data on it. I’m not diminishing the importance of that, but I think the human story and narrative is a beautiful thing. I think that’s what makes us different.

DW: You were the lead sponsor of the Community Expanded Mental Health Services Act, which allowed Irving Park-area residents to self-fund the [opening](#) of a new mental health center. Tell me about that.

SF: I think that it was an amazing group of people who were concerned about the City of Chicago closing down its mental health centers [in] their community, and they came up with a solution that is sort of outside of government – a front-door ballot referendum asking taxpayers in a certain mapped area if they would be willing to pay just a small nominal fee more into a fund that would reinvigorate a mental health center in their community.

This is how things should work in government, where the public comes to us with an idea or a solution to a problem. I have to say I have done some glorious work in the General Assembly and this would definitely be in the top 10. To go to their ribbon cutting a couple of weeks ago and to be able to quote Margaret Mead and say, “Never underestimate what a small group of conscious people can do,” because that’s often what makes those changes – it was so appropriate for this group. It was just a delight to work with them. It is going to be a model perhaps, in the future as we move into a new administration looking for those kinds of innovations.

DW: What do you foresee for the state of Illinois under the leadership of Gov.-elect Bruce Rauner?

SF: This is not the first Republican governor that I will have served under. I think that he will bring a fresh approach. He has some high-minded ideas and new approaches to things that I’m sure will be ... brought into the laboratory of ideas that we live in. Gov.-elect Rauner’s challenges are going to be how to fold those ideas into the current and existing environment and challenges in that environment. ... On Jan. 1 we overnight have a \$2 billion problem. ... By not extending the income tax, which he has asked us not to do, he will be challenged to come up with alternative solutions to a budget that he’s going to have to unveil. ...

I know he has some additional ideas about incorporating service taxes, broadening the tax base and dropping the rate. I am in many ways very interested in hearing what he has to say about it, because we are living in a service economy. And again, I think he’s going to find that he has challenges with his own partisans on any kind of taxation in general.

Keep in mind that this is a gentleman who has never worked in government. He has never held elected office. He is used to using his leadership skills in the boardroom, and it’s a very different animal. But, you know what? He is going to be our governor and we are going to work together as best we can. We will have common ground. We will have differences. And one thing for sure is the problems we have today under the leadership of Gov. Quinn are going to be the same problems that we have under Gov. Rauner.

DW: What’s been your experience working with House Speaker Michael Madigan as assistant majority leader?

SF: I have a great deal of respect for my leader. I have watched him work from some very, very difficult times. He’s very disciplined. Nobody knows state

government better than the speaker. Nobody holds the respect for the legislative branch and its constitutional power more than the speaker. And it has been a real learning experience for me to work with him.

He's taken on some extraordinary challenges. He has great leadership skills, and I'm hoping that we can move forward. We passed a very controversial pension reform bill that is now awaiting a decision by the courts. Cutting Medicaid \$1.6 billion – it was a very difficult exercise done so that Medicaid wouldn't collapse under its own weight because of our liability. We've done some very, very difficult things and had to make some tough decisions, and Mike Madigan is not afraid to make tough decisions.

DW: What's at the top of your agenda for 2015?

SF: I think that the budget is always the biggest concern, and kind of getting our fiscal house in order is always the most important piece for me because I think you make a fertile environment for small business. I think if you have a robust education system and good graduation rates that is what is going to bring more business to the state of Illinois. People want to raise their families in a state that has stability and a good education system and not live in an environment that is prohibitive. And I think that no matter what your political stripes are, [there] is one common goal that every member of the General Assembly has. And I think that, first and foremost, is getting our fiscal house in order.

DW: You sponsored legislation passed in 2010 that allowed adult-adoptees in Illinois to obtain their birth certificates. Tell me about what this achievement meant to you on a personal level.

SF: Eleven thousand people plus have gotten a copy of their original birth certificate in this state [as a result of the bill]. ... It took me 14 years to pass that law. So on a personal level, I had had a reunion in my 20s, and when I publically started to talk about this, flocks of people came to me and said, "Will you help me find my birth family?" or, "Will you help me find my child's birth family? I adopted this kid and I have no medical information." This has been so fulfilling for me just seeing other people being able to get information about the first chapter of their life – which was just a blank, black, dark place for them – and how their lives have changed and they've been able to move on and turn the corner and know their story and tell their story, it's very important.

DW: You're a Lakeview resident. What do you enjoy most about the neighborhood?

SF: It's just a thriving, vibrant neighborhood. The restaurants, the entertainment, the transportation – public transportation is very good here. The lakefront, of course is stunning. It's an amazing district. It's young and vibrant, and it's got one of the most enviable business districts outside of downtown Chicago.

DW: What do you like to do with your time outside of work?

SF: I spend a lot of time in my neighborhood. I love the theater and I have a great group of friends in the neighborhood. We like to try new restaurants and, of course, baseball. [I'm a] big Cubs fan. I'm a season ticketholder and a big fan, a very excited fan with the changes that are being made with management. Every time a new manager comes on, it's exciting to hear their strategy and perspective because as Cubs fans, hope springs eternal. There's always next year, and I think it's been quite a challenge, but I find myself reinvigorated and excited again. It's a time of new beginnings.