

Speaker Biographies

Bridging the Partisan Divide

Elaine Nekritz recently resigned after serving fifteen years in the Illinois House of Representatives. She represented portions of several of Chicago's north and northwest suburbs. She served as Assistant Majority Leader in the House as well as Chair of the House Judiciary Civil Law Committee and the House Personnel and Pensions Committee.

Elaine focused her legislative work on solutions to the state's fiscal problems, particularly pension underfunding. She was committed to a blend of reforms, spending cuts and revenues to address Illinois' budget woes and backlog of unpaid bills.

Providing a social safety net and administering a fair criminal justice system were Elaine's other areas of focus in state government. She worked to ensure that state spending in those areas prioritized modern, evidence-based practices that offered the best use of limited state resources.

Elaine now works as a lobbyist focusing on clean energy, transportation and criminal justice reform. Elaine is a graduate of the University of Michigan Law School and received her undergraduate degree from Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas.

Mike Fortner was born in Chicago, raised throughout the Midwest and is married with two young adult children. He is the current State Representative of the 49th District. First elected in 2006, he serves residents in parts of Aurora, Bartlett, Batavia, Elgin, Geneva, Naperville, North Aurora, St. Charles, South Elgin, Warrenville, Wayne and West Chicago. Mike is the Minority Spokesperson for the Economic Opportunity, Cities & Villages, Elections & Campaign Finance, Cybersecurity, Data Analytics & IT, and Special Committee on Tollway Oversight. He also serves on the Health Care Licenses and Higher Education Appropriation Committees.

Before going to Springfield, Mike served at many levels of local government in West Chicago. He was on the Historic Preservation Commission, the Plan Commission, the School Board, and served as Mayor of West Chicago from 2001-2006.

One of Mike's unusual qualities for a legislator is the fact that he is not a lawyer. He has degrees in both math and physics from Carlton College and Brandeis University. In addition to his public service, Mike is an accomplished teacher and researcher. Mike is a retired Associate Professor of physics at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb and has worked on research experiments at Fermilab for more than 20 years.

Mike worked closely with the League of Woman Voters in their efforts to end political gerrymandering through a constitutional referendum in 2010 and beyond.

Steve Andersson is the State Representative for Illinois' 65th Legislative District which includes parts of Batavia, Geneva, St. Charles, Pingree Grove, Gilberts, Wayne, Elgin, South Elgin, Hampshire, and Huntley. He and his wife, Nanette, have been residents of

Geneva for 25 years. They have been married for 30 years and have two children, Matthew and Sarah.

Andersson's current committee assignments include: Business Incentives for Local Comm.; Construction Industry & Code Enforcement; Judiciary - Civil; Mental Health; Museums, Arts, & Cultural Enhancement; Appropriations-General Service; Civil Procedure Subcommittee; Commercial Law Subcommittee; Trusts & Estates Law Subcommittee; and Justice System Subcommittee.

Andersson is a small business owner and has been a licensed attorney for more than two decades. He is a partner at the law firms of Mickey, Wilson, Weiler, Renzi and Andersson, P.C. and the Elder Law Center, P.C. He is admitted to practice law at all Illinois courts, the United States Supreme Court, the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, and United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois.

Andersson earned his bachelor's degree from Northern Illinois University in 1986 and his J.D. from Northern Illinois University in 1992 where he graduated Magna Cum Laude. Prior to joining the Illinois House of Representatives, Andersson served his community as a trustee and treasurer on the Geneva Library District Board for approximately 5 years, including serving 2 years as treasurer. In addition, he has served as a Republican precinct committeeman for Geneva's 3rd Precinct.

Andersson is a past president of the Kane County Bar Association. He is also a member of the Kane County Bar Foundation; Illinois Bar Association; American Bar Association; National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys; and served on the governing board of the Aurora Family Counseling Service and Big Brothers Big Sisters.

The Cost of Segregation

Kendra Freeman joined the Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC) in 2016 and assists with project management, research and policy development for MPC's work in housing and community development. Her work includes engaging external partners in new and ongoing projects, including the [Cost of Segregation](#) and community-based planning efforts for transit-oriented development through the [Corridor Development Initiative](#).

Prior to MPC, Kendra spent more than 15 years in affordable housing development and management, where her work focused on investing in people to improve the quality of life in their communities. She held various roles, from direct service to senior management. As executive director of Holsten Human Capital Development, NFP, Kendra was responsible for oversight of daily operations with an annual budget in excess of \$1.5 million and 25 staff serving more than 1,200 households living in subsidized housing.

Kendra is a native Chicagoan and licensed real estate broker. She holds a bachelor's in sociology and a master's in public administration from DePaul University. She serves on the Board of Directors for Storycatchers Theatre and advisory board for the Near North Unity Program, and is a volunteer tax preparer for the Center for Economic Progress.

Focusing Our Communities on a Common Goal: Clean, Clear, Safe, Abundant Water for Everyone

Beth Baranski has an architectural degree from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her employment history includes stints in historic preservation, community development, grant writing, comprehensive planning, and economic development. These days, she dedicates most of her time to building consensus on water resource issues in Jo Daviess County.

Krista Grimm, President of the LWV-Lake Michigan Region Inter League Organization (LWV-LMR ILO) shares “Stand Up for Clean Water, From Your Local Creek to the Gulf of Mexico” with its invitation to join our ILOs in their goal of conducting “100 Meetings to 100 Years.” Learn how your local LWV can schedule one of these meetings. Krista Grimm is the President of the League of Women Voters Lake Michigan Region. She is also the Water Issues Specialist for LWV of Illinois. She is an urban planner, and also Chairs the Sustainability Commission of the Chicago suburb where she lives with her family.

Rosemary Heilemann, an active volunteer with both ILOs and her local LWV-Deerfield/Lincolnshire, will share how she’s bringing tools like the Watershed Game and the Watershed Model provided by the LWV to the advocacy work she’s doing in collaboration with other groups.

The Role of Property Taxes in Funding Education: Local, State and Federal Implications

Ginger Ostro joined Advance Illinois as Executive Director in January 2016. Ostro previously served as Chief Financial Officer of Chicago Public Schools, where she helped usher in a more equitable, student-based school funding model while responsible for financial operations of the third largest district in the country and a nearly \$6 billion annual budget.

Ostro’s career has been devoted to addressing inequities in education, human services and juvenile justice. Her experience in education includes roles in K-12 and higher education. Prior to joining Chicago Public Schools, she worked in state government in a number of roles including Director of the Governor’s Office of Management and Budget and later as Deputy Executive Director of the Illinois Student Assistance Commission, where she helped strengthen the Commission’s role in helping low-income students access and complete college. While at Chicago Metropolitan 2020, a non-profit organization focused on improving life in the Chicago Metropolitan region, Ostro worked on efforts to reduce youth involvement in the juvenile justice system, policies to help the formerly incarcerated, and a system to identify and intervene with young children who had been exposed to violence. She also has worked at Governors State University, helping to develop a curriculum to prepare students for work in human services and an innovative Family Development Center on the university campus to serve children from birth through 4th grade and their families.

Ostro holds a Bachelor's degree in Politics, Economics, Rhetoric and Law from The University of Chicago and a Master's degree in Public Policy, Health and Human Services from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

Joshua Aurand is a 2000 Harlem Graduate. He obtained his Accounting Degree from NIU in 2005 and his MBA in 2007. He has served as the Assistant Superintendent for Business and Operations since July of 2010 and this is his 12th year in the District. Prior to assuming his current role, Mr. Aurand has served as the Business Manager/Treasurer for the District from July of 2008 to June of 2010. He also served as the District's accountant from May of 2004 to May of 2006. He has his Chief School Business Official endorsement. His wife is a literacy specialist at an elementary school in the District and he has 3 children who also attend school in the District.

Advocacy Tools for the Fair Tax Amendment

Alex Tindal Wiesendanger was born and raised in Harlem and the Bronx in New York City, and witnessed firsthand the racial and economic injustice endemic to low-income communities and communities of color. Alex spent two years as the Associate Director of the Tennessee Coalition to Abolish State Killing where he led a grassroots movement that succeeded in passing Tennessee's first anti-death penalty legislation of the modern era. Moving to Chicago, Alex joined the organizing staff of the Community Renewal Society, a 134-year-old faith based alliance of over 100 churches, eventually becoming the Director of Organizing. At CRS, Alex led multiple campaigns across the city, county and state and trained hundreds of church leaders in faith-based organizing and activism. Some victories included removing barriers to employment for people with criminal records, re-writing the Chicago Public Schools Student Code of Conduct to reduce racial discrimination, raising new revenue for education funding for low income districts, and creating the first ever funding for community based Restorative Justice programs in Cook County.

Alex recently became the National Organizing Director at Jobs to Move America where he is building a national coalition of labor, community, faith, environmental, and civil rights organizations to create opportunity for family-sustaining employment for disadvantaged workers and communities. He was a member of the Jesuit Volunteer Core, lived in a Catholic worker community, and received a Masters degree in Social Justice and Community Development from Loyola University Chicago. He lives in the North Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago with his wife, Sharaya Tindal Wiesendanger, and their two beautiful children. They attend St. Agatha Catholic Church and are active leaders of the church's social justice work. Alex is currently writing a book on faith-based organizing entitled, *Confronting Pharaoh*, to be published by Loyola Press in the Spring of 2018.

Criminal Justice: Reforms Accomplished and Reforms Still Needed

Mike Nerheim was elected Lake County State's Attorney in 2012. He oversees an office of 144 attorneys, investigators, victim coordinators, paralegals, and support staff, plus two certified comfort dogs and a corps of volunteers. He created a first-of-its-kind Case Review Panel consisting of volunteer legal professionals who bring a wide range

of experience, including from outside of Lake County. As an independent review board, the panel's duty is to focus on the issue of wrongful convictions and to review cases where there is evidence of actual innocence. The independent Case Review Panel is supplemented by an in-house Conviction Integrity Unit comprised of senior-level staff. Additionally, he created a Citizens Advisory Board comprised of a diverse group of community leaders to engage the public on key issues related to crime, public safety, and restoring trust in the criminal justice system.

State's Attorney Nerheim is a lifelong resident of Lake County. He earned a Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice and Psychology from Winona State University in Winona, Minnesota and earned his Juris Doctor, Cum Laude, from The John Marshall Law School in Chicago, Illinois.

Sharlyn Grace is the Senior Criminal Justice Policy Analyst and Staff Attorney at Chicago Appleseed Fund for Justice. She is also a co-founder of the Chicago Community Bond Fund. Prior to joining Appleseed, Sharlyn managed a school-based restorative justice program in Back of the Yards and coordinated the Juvenile Expungement Help Desk at the Cook County Juvenile Center. Sharlyn is passionate about racial justice and criminal legal system reform efforts, including prisoners' rights, ending police violence, and decarceration.

Anthony Lowery is the Director of Policy & Advocacy for Safer Foundation, directing the organization's legislative and administrative efforts to eliminate the systemic barriers to employment for people with criminal records in the state of Illinois and beyond. Tony has just recently been named Associate Vice President, Community Housing Programs.

He has been an ardent advocate for the creation of new opportunities for people with records. Tony was a key architect and advocate of the Chicago Housing Authority Reentry Housing pilot, which for the first time permits a limited number of returning citizens to rejoin their families in public housing.

He convenes Safer Foundation's Council of Advisors to Reduce Recidivism through Employment (CARRE) policy efforts that have led to 55 new criminal justice reform legislative initiatives that have become public acts in the Illinois General Assembly.

He has consulted, developed and directed programs for people who were chemically dependent with criminal records for the past 20 years.

Tony holds a bachelor's degree from Tennessee State University and certification as an Alcohol and Drug Prevention Specialist in the state of Illinois.

Senator Don Harmon (D-Oak Park) was first elected in 2002 and is currently serving his fifth term in the Illinois Senate. He serves in leadership as the Senate President Pro Tempore.

During his tenure, Senator Harmon has championed early childhood education, easing the tax burden on working families, cleaning up state government, curbing gun violence, strengthening voters' rights, protecting Illinois' natural resources, marriage equality, expanding healthcare for low-income families and modernizing the electric power grid.

Senator Harmon serves as Chair of the Executive Committee, Co-Chair of the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules, as well as on the Assignment and Judiciary Committees. He earned his high school diploma at St. Ignatius College Prep and his bachelor's degree at Knox College. He holds both a law degree and an MBA from the University of Chicago.

Public Health Approach to Preventing Firearm Injury and Death

Maryanne Mason is an Assistant Research Professor in the Department of Pediatrics at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine. Dr. Mason also serves as Community-Faculty Liaison for Research with Northwestern University's Alliance for Research in Chicago Communities (ARCC), a program of Northwestern University's Clinical and Translational Science Institute. She is principal investigator for the Illinois Violent Death Reporting System (IVDRS) and works closely with the Illinois Department of Public Health to led work on the Statewide Drug Overdose Reporting System (SUDORS), Illinois' opioid overdose fatality tracking system. Dr. Mason received her PhD in Sociology from Loyola University of Chicago. Her areas of research include qualitative methods, public health surveillance systems, child health and well-being, community-engaged research and injury and violence prevention.

Kathleen Conlon Wasik is an Executive Director for the League of Women Voters of Lake County, IL. She was elected to Grayslake District 127 Board of Education in 2015. Kathleen founded GCG Information Systems, Inc., a systems integration company serving fortune 100 companies in the Chicago area. She began working with the Illinois Violent Death Reporting System (IVDRS), held at Lurie Children's Hospital Data Lab, after the Newtown incident (December 2014). She wanted to better understand violent crime from a public health perspective, and has worked to strengthen IVDRS as a means of better inform intervention and public policy efforts. Kathleen's efforts have been instrumental in IVDRS receiving a multi-year grant from the Center for Disease Control to collect data on preventable violent in Illinois – currently 82% of Illinois preventable violent deaths have been documented (including, gun violence, suicide, infant, intimate partner, and recently opioid overdose deaths).

Through Kathleen's work, Lurie received a \$12 million grant to support community based organizations on the South Side of Chicago working with children who've experience gun violence.

Sana Yousuf is a Community Epidemiologist with the Illinois Violent Death Reporting System (IVDRS). Ms. Yousuf also serves as the Outreach Evaluation Specialist Epidemiologist for Healthy Communities at Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago.

Ms. Yousuf received her Masters in Public Health (MPH) with a concentration in Epidemiology from Loyola University of Chicago. Her areas of research include injury and violence prevention, resource mapping, and public health surveillance systems.

Making All Votes Count - Redistricting Update and Implementing Automatic Voter Registration

Cynthia Canary is a nonprofit policy consultant who works on communications and policy issues. Her current clients include the Committee for Economic Development, The Stevenson Center on Democracy, the Square One Foundation and CHANGE Illinois. Canary was a Senior Advisor to the Board of the Independent Maps Amendment Campaign. Canary served as Chair of Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel's Task Force on Ethics, which culminated in the enactment of the City's first new ordinance on ethics in 25 years. She was the founding Executive Director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform (ICPR), serving from 1997 to 2011. Previously, she was Executive Director of the League of Women Voters of Illinois, where she led the fight for the enactment of the National Voter Registration Act. Canary is on the boards of Illinois NPR, the Mikva Challenge, and the Coalition for Integrity. She holds a B.A. in Political Science and History from Hampshire College and did graduate work in Government at Georgetown University.

Abe Scarr is responsible for program and organizational development, research, and legislative advocacy for Illinois PIRG. Before coming to Illinois PIRG, Mr. Scarr was the director of ConnPIRG where he worked with ConnPIRG students and staff on a variety of campaigns, including successful efforts to pass Election Day and online voter registration and to pass a bill modernizing recycling in Connecticut, moving it closer to zero waste. Mr. Scarr started as campus organizer with MASSPIRG in 2003 and spent nine years as an Organizer and Organizing Director with various state PIRGs. He graduated from Haverford College in 2002 with a degree in Philosophy.

ERA Advocacy and Activism

Lou Lang who currently serves as the House Deputy Majority Leader, has fought for economic development, working families, civil rights, and health care and Medicaid reform. Lang, a father of five, resides in Skokie with his wife Teri.

He has been a staunch defender of civil and equal rights for Illinois citizens. He is strong advocate reproductive choice and is currently fighting to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment in Illinois. Lang was also proud co-sponsor of Illinois' new marriage equality law.

Lang also led the fight to reform the Illinois health care system and to cut Illinois Medicaid spending and waste by \$1.7 billion. Additionally, Lang successfully championed a new, strictly-regulated law that will allow chronically ill individuals struggling with ailments, such as cancer, HIV/AIDS, and glaucoma, to receive medical marijuana, through their established doctor's prescription, to alleviate their pain and suffering.

Thanks to his leadership, Lou Lang has won the admiration and respect of his peers in the Legislature and his constituents at home. He is a rising star within the Democratic Party, advancing to House Democratic Floor Leader in 1993, Assistant Majority Leader in 1997, and Deputy Majority Leader in 2009. He is also the Niles Township Democratic Committeeman and the Executive Vice Chairman of the Cook County Democratic Party.

Heather Steans has represented Illinois' 7th District in the Senate since 2008. Currently, she chairs the Appropriations I Committee, vice chairs the Appropriations II Committee and serves on the Executive, Environment and Conservation, Government Reform and Human Services committees. Steans has passed legislation to bring marriage equality to Illinois, reform the state's Medicaid program, enact significant nursing home reform, and improve the environment by reducing mercury waste, creating commercial composting capabilities and banning microbeads.

Heather Steans graduated from Princeton with a B.A. in Urban Studies and received her M.A. in Public Policy from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Her professional career has focused on government finance, economic development and education reform. She is the former budget director of the Wisconsin Department of Industry, Labor and Human Relations, served as a strategic planner with the Chicago Public Schools and was a consultant with Ernst & Young. Steans has received numerous awards, including the Legislator of the Year Award from AARP, the Richard Phelan Profile in Courage Award from Planned Parenthood, the Legislative Recovery Award from Trilogy, and the Equality Illinois Freedom Award.

Heather Steans and her husband Leo have lived with their three children in the Edgewater neighborhood of Chicago for 22 years.