

**Connecticut State Representative  
Christopher Donovan**

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May 10, 2003  
SWEL 380: Political Social Work Practice  
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Currently in the Connecticut General Assembly, which is comprised by the House of Representatives and the Senate, there are four members that hold MSW degrees. State Representative Toni Walker received her MSW from Southern Connecticut State University, while Senator Edith Prague and Representatives Kenneth Green and Christopher Donovan each received their MSW degrees from the University of Connecticut School of Social Work (class lecture, 4/25/03). The type of social work practice that these individuals do is such that illustrates the responsibilities that workers have in becoming involved in the political process. This paper will take a further look at the role a social worker can play in the political system by exploring the life and work of State Representative Christopher G. Donovan, a Democrat who represents and serves in Meriden's 84<sup>th</sup> Assembly District.

### **Down the Road to Social Work**

Representative Donovan was born and raised in Pennsylvania. He earned his Bachelor of Science degree in Biology from Villanova University in Philadelphia in 1975. Eager to find a job upon graduation from Villanova, Rep. Donovan found a position as a day care provider at The Learning Center in Philadelphia. It was here that Rep. Donovan first became interested in the field of social work, as he was exposed to it in different ways. In addition to providing care and education to children, he came to know a social worker and a neighborhood organizer. Upon working with these individuals, he saw social work on the micro level, as the worker provided casework services to children and families at the center, and the macro level, as the organizer encouraged members of the community to get involved and fight for certain issues. Rep.

Donovan also became involved in a union that represented day care providers. This union provided funding for its members who were interested in taking classes at Rutgers University. As the interest in social work had been sparked within Rep. Donovan due to the experience he had had at The Learning Center, he chose to take advantage of the funding and enrolled in social work classes at Rutgers. After attending two social work classes at Rutgers, Rep. Donovan decided that he wanted to pursue a Master's degree in the field. As the union was willing to provide tuition for anyone who chose to enroll in a program full-time, they would only cover education at schools in the Pennsylvania/New Jersey area. Despite this, Rep. Donovan applied to the University of Connecticut School of Social Work and chose to attend when he was accepted there. Therefore, he packed up in Philadelphia and headed for a Connecticut (personal communication with Rep. Donovan on 05/06/03).

At UCONN, Rep. Donovan chose to pursue the Community Organization method. Rep. Donovan recalls this time as one when people in society were not very political, yet he was interested in effecting change. His first field placement as a MSW student was at a citizen's action organization in New Britain, CT, while his second placement was in Representative Toby Moffett's office. In these positions, he was not only involved in community organization, but he was also introduced to the political arena. Upon graduating from the School of Social Work in 1980, Rep. Donovan first took a position working with an environmental group, though he did not stay at this position because they could not pay him. Seeking more opportunity, Rep. Donovan began working with the Connecticut Citizen's Action Group (personal communication with Rep. Donovan, 05/06/03). Toby Moffett and Ralph Nader created the Connecticut

Citizen's Action Group, or CCAG, in 1970. Its mission statement reads as follows: "CCAG is a statewide membership organization dedicated to working with people to bring about social, economic, and environmental justice" ([www.ccag.org](http://www.ccag.org)). While at CCAG, Rep. Donovan worked on issues such as environmental protection, quality and adequate housing, affordable health care, and consumer rights. Rep. Donovan spent about four years as a lobbyist on such issues, while he also participated in Toby Moffett's unsuccessful campaign for United States Senate in 1982 (personal communication with Rep. Donovan, 05/06/03).

Since being introduced to a labor union during his time at The Learning Center, Rep. Donovan became passionate about what they strive for, as their values and goals are quite similar to his own. This connection led him to the Service Employees International Union, or SEIU, a labor union that works with people in services (personal communication with Rep. Donovan, 5/6/03). The SEIU is considered the largest union in North America, as it is comprised of approximately 1.5 million people working in such fields as health care, public service, building service, and industrial and allied services ([www.seiu.org](http://www.seiu.org)). As stated on its website, this union is dedicated to promoting and ensuring "secure and affordable quality health care, fair pay and retirement with dignity, and safer jobs and the resources to provide a service we can be proud of" ([www.seiu.org](http://www.seiu.org)). Members of SEIU may be nurses, janitors, bus drivers, librarians, social services workers, police officers, or in many other different positions. A great number of its members include women, African-Americans, and immigrants ([www.seiu.org](http://www.seiu.org)). While working with SEIU, Rep. Donovan focused on such issues as day care, family leave, and equal pay ([www.cga.state.ct.us](http://www.cga.state.ct.us)). Maintaining dedication to unions, Rep. Donovan also

was involved with LEAP, a coalition of different unions that came together to support grassroots candidates campaigning for various positions throughout the country.

### **Going Political**

After spending close to ten years working in the field as an organizer, activist, lobbyist, campaign worker, etc., Rep. Donovan decided that he wanted to take on another role and made the choice to pursue a House seat in the Connecticut General Assembly. In 1990, Rep. Donovan ran against a conservative Democrat incumbent for the seat in his district, though he lost the race. After some redistricting and the death of the incumbent, Rep. Donovan chose to run again in 1992. Fortunately, he won the election and became the State Representative from the 84<sup>th</sup> Assembly District of Meriden (personal communication with Rep. Donovan, 05/06/03).

As a member of the House of Representatives, Rep. Donovan is actively involved in the decision and change making processes determined by the government. He currently serves as the House Chair of Labor and Public Employee Committee, responsible for ensuring that this committee presides over the following,

All matters relating to workers' compensation, unemployment compensation, conditions of employment, hours of labor, minimum wages, industrial safety, occupational health and safety, labor unions and labor disputes; all matters relating to the department of Labor; and all matters relating to the conditions of employment of state and municipal employees and the substantive law of state and municipal employees' collective bargaining ([www.cga.state.ct.us](http://www.cga.state.ct.us)).

One of his biggest accomplishments has been the consistent increase of minimum wage since 1997. Rep. Donovan led the efforts in increasing minimum wage from \$6.70 to \$6.90 in January 2003 and to \$7.10 in 2004, as minimum wage was at \$5.18 when Rep. Donovan began as House Chair of the committee in 1997. Rep. Donovan views this

increase as urgent and necessary. When this bill was passed by the full legislature, Rep. Donovan reported, "I am proud to have played a strong role in this decision. The citizens of Connecticut- the richest state- deserve an opportunity to earn a decent pay wage, in particular, those who solely rely on this one income" ([www.cga.state.ct.us](http://www.cga.state.ct.us)). In addition to increasing minimum wage, Rep. Donovan has led the way in making strides for working families so that they can be independent and are able to rely on their own means to be successful. He has been working towards extended paid family leave time for such reasons as births, injuries, illnesses, etc. This is crucial because, as Rep. Donovan claims, "this will allow families a chance to take care of important family responsibilities without losing needed income" ([www.cga.state.ct.us](http://www.cga.state.ct.us)). Through the Labor Committee, Rep. Donovan has also been involved other issues, which include ensuring worker's compensation, increasing job security for temporary employees, and protecting and ensuring employee benefits.

As a member of the Public Health Committee, Rep. Donovan participates in all matters that involve the Department of Public Health, the Department of Mental Retardation, the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, the Office of Health Care Access and any other matter that relates to health. Rep. Donovan is a strong supporter of health care coverage for everyone and works hard to make that happen. He is currently working to increase prescription drug coverage for the elderly, to provide additional support and assistance to individuals with mental illnesses and to ensure coverage for uninsured children, more of a challenge recently as the HUSKY program has fallen victim to budget cuts ([www.cga.state.ct.us](http://www.cga.state.ct.us)).

Rep. Donovan is also a member of the Appropriations Committee, whose responsibilities are as follows:

...cognizance of all matters relating to the appropriations and the budgets of state agencies. Other issues under the committee's jurisdiction include matters relating to state employees' salaries, benefits and retirement, teachers' retirement and veterans' pensions and collective bargaining agreements and arbitration awards for all state employees ([www.cga.state.ct.us](http://www.cga.state.ct.us)).

He is also a member of the Government Administration and Elections Committee, which presides over the following matters,

...all matters relating to the Department of Administrative Services, including purchasing and central collections, but excluding personnel and labor relations; all matters relating to the Department of Public Works; all matters relating to state government organizing and reorganization, structures and procedures; all matters relating to leasing, construction, maintenance, purchase and sale of state property and facilities and all bills authorizing the conveyance of real property, or any interest therein, by the state shall be referred to said committee; the Freedom of Information Commission and the Ethics Commission; state and federal relations; interstate compacts; compacts between the state and Indian tribes; constitutional amendments, including any proposed constitutional amendments favorably reported by any other committee, which proposed amendments shall be referred to said committee; and all matters relating to elections and election laws ([www.cga.state.ct.us](http://www.cga.state.ct.us)).

As evident through the detailed descriptions of the committees and their responsibilities, it is clear that Rep. Donovan is involved in many different aspects of government and issues that may arise within government. In addition to his involvement in these areas and the bills that he has introduced and supported in relation to these committee agendas, Rep. Donovan has been involved in several other bills and issues. He is actively involved in promoting legislature that protects the environment and has introduced bills to do so this session, as well as previous sessions. In the 2002 legislative session, Rep. Donovan had a 100% positive voting record on environmental issues. He reports, "Protecting the environment is about protecting our health. I will continue the fight to protect the environment for us and future generations" ([www.cga.state.ct.us](http://www.cga.state.ct.us)).

In this session, Rep. Donovan has supported such bills involving the preservation of open areas and farmland.

Other bills that Rep. Donovan has introduced this session include restricting hand-held mobile telephone use by motor vehicle operators, developing after-school programs for students ranging from kindergarten through high school, and encouraging greater representation by Puerto Rican and Latino individuals.

On a typical day at the Legislative Office Building, Rep. Donovan would be found busy voting on bills and issues among his various committees, while there are some days that are spent in session with his colleagues, again, voting on bills and arguing issues. Much time is also spent organizing and planning with colleagues to affect votes on certain issues. Rep. Donovan is working to be elected by his peers as House Majority Leader in 2004 and is once again using his organizing skills to gain support from his colleagues. Therefore, he spends much time meeting with individuals to discuss his plans and visions (personal communication with Rep. Donovan, 05/06/03).

### **Social Work and Politics**

In their discussion of "Social Workers in Politics", Toby Weismiller and Sunny Harris Rome describe how social workers play a role or should play a role in government.

In the opening remarks of their article, they write,

Such social workers as Jane Addams and Lillian Wald worked to influence government, especially at the local level, and they regarded participation in government as part of the answer to solving individual problems. As they became involved in government, these early social workers recognized the importance of using power to enable people to develop their own abilities and resources and to create programs that meet needs other than their own (2305).

Similar to this sentiment shared by Jane Addams and Lillian Wald, Rep. Donovan believes that the involvement of social workers in politics is necessary and obvious. Not only do social workers have the responsibility to help their clients on the individual level, but also on the societal level. The values that are engrained into the heart of the social work profession, such as empowerment and strengths, are those that can more easily be reached on the individual level when they are experienced within a society that supports such growth. If the society does not support such values or does not provide the necessary and accessible resources, it will be more difficult for an individual to make the changes they want to make in their lives.

Rep. Donovan reports that clinicians have the responsibility to help their clients make the changes or reach the goals that they have set out to do. There are times when obstacles get in the way, when individuals cannot do what they want to do because they do not have the resources available to do so. Rep. Donovan reports that this is where the clinician needs to step up- social workers have the responsibility to get involved in making changes for their clients on the larger scale. There are numerous sources of oppression and injustices in society. As clinicians interact with their clients on a regular basis and are familiar with their needs, then the clinicians become responsible for doing something about it. As in any situation, if a person sits back and does nothing, then they do not have any control over the situation. Yet, if they chose to do something about the situation, then they will begin to have some control, as they can influence their situation. Social workers are in a position in which they have the means to have a strong influence, they just need to take the proactive role in seeking to obtain control and making change (interview with Rep. Donovan, 05/06/03).

Rep. Donovan believes that being a social worker in the political arena has many advantages. He reports that social workers are trained in such a way that they are constantly looking for causes, whether they be economic, social, etc., and try to figure out how to change the problematic state. As his personal background is in Community Organization, he admits that he is always organizing, therefore that skill has been crucial to his political career. Rep. Donovan reports that he has always been organizing- while running his campaign and during his current work. He is always talking to his colleagues about the issues that are important to him and tries to motivate them to support his position. He is also organizing when he is pushing to improve social conditions on behalf of his clients, so that their quality of life will be increased. Organizing is key to gain support for an issue, thus making it more likely to get enough recognition to influence change. Rep. Donovan reports that social workers must become energized around the issues that are most important to their clients and organize with others to become a powerful force ready to take on any opposition (interview with Rep. Donovan, 5/06/03).

## **Conclusion**

Throughout his years in the House of Representatives, Rep. Christopher Donovan has been dedicated to serving the people of Connecticut by influencing change. Throughout his career as a politician, he has not given up his career as a social worker, finding a way to advocate for his clients by supporting the issues that are most important to them and influencing legislature that will benefit them. He has used the organizing skills that he had learned through his social work training and developed through the years to gain support for bills that he has introduced and other issues that he is passionate

about. Rep. Donovan will continue to work on health care for all, women's issues, living wages, environmental safety, and equal access to education for everyone.

Rep. Donovan's hard work and dedication to different groups in Connecticut have been recognized through numerous awards, including the Child Advocacy Legislative Leadership Award, Humanitarian of the Year, and NASW's Legislator of the Year. He has also been recognized from various groups, including the Connecticut Coalition of Police and Correction Officers, the Office of Multicultural Health Office Legislation, Capital Community College, and The Connecticut State Council of Machinists.

Outside of his duties as a Representative, Rep. Donovan serves on the University of Connecticut School of Social Work Advisory Committee, is a Labor Representative with the Congress of Connecticut Community Colleges and teaches part-time at the University of Hartford ([www.cga.state.ct.us](http://www.cga.state.ct.us)). He lives in Meriden, CT with his family and plays guitar and sings with a rock-n-roll band called "The Shoes" in his spare time. The band is made up of some colleagues from the LOB, as well as some union members and friends. The band covers songs from Aerosmith to the White Stripes and many in between (personal communication with Rep. Donovan, 05/06/03).

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