

Desire to serve

Having helped serve people throughout her life, Samuelson is now doing the same in the House of Representatives

By JEFF JONES

Though her life's work has centered on providing care to the elderly, freshman Rep. Char Samuelson (R-New Brighton) is not a stranger to the legislative process.



Rep. Char Samuelson

As an administrator for HealthEast senior care division, she successfully lobbied legislators for a bill to move the company's Bethesda Care Center for senior services to a new location in South St. Paul. As a result of the legislation, she said, the center is doing well and serving the needs of citizens in that area.

Serving people, especially the elderly, has always been at the heart of Samuelson's work. She began her career as a registered nurse at Mounds Park Hospital and worked in chemical dependency centers and nursing homes before returning to school for an administrator's license.

Since then, she has worked for Unicare and HealthEast health systems and after an unsuccessful run for the Legislature in 2000, she began consulting for a variety of clients in the area of long-term care. She currently works for Health Service Innovations, a consulting firm that provides a broad range of services including nursing home administration, senior citizen housing research, executive searches, and interim feasibility studies.

Having worked both one-on-one with patients and as an administrator, Samuelson said she has a hard time deciding which she enjoys more. But all of her work, she says, stems from a desire to serve others. That desire comes from "just a basic concern and care for other people, to try to make a difference — a positive difference in what happens to people."

She sees her new role in the Legislature as another way to continue that mission. She is glad to put her expertise to work on the House Health and Human Services Policy and Fi-

nance committees, and the chair of the finance committee, Rep. Fran Bradley (R-Rochester), says he is glad to have her.

Bradley said that Samuelson brings a strong base of knowledge to the committees and she is quick to learn new concepts and ideas that are crucial to the legislative process. "She's really a gutsy person," Bradley said. "She doesn't shy away at all from jumping into areas that may be controversial. She sees the needs for major reforms."

In thinking through those reforms, Samuelson said she struggles with how government and health care should properly mix.

"I think it's important for government to be involved, and the question is how involved should government be?" she said. "I know that with the demographics the way they are and an influx of older people, we're looking at ways — through insurance or other means — of

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paying for long-term care and services. Because it's very costly."

She said she hopes to explore "good ideas" that may break the traditional model of caring for the elderly such as long-term care insurance, alternative care grants, and elderly waivers that allow people to have services in their homes or assisted living facilities. "We need to look for methods that cost less but still meet the needs of our individuals," she said.

Samuelson describes her committee experience so far as "very good, but very scary."

"The good part of it is, I think we've been educated quite well," she said. The scary part is the decisions committee members will be forced to make about how to reconcile funding for important services with the state's projected budget deficit. "Behind every dollar is a face. We're not dealing with inanimate type objects," she said.

Having been a nine-year member of the

New Brighton City Council, Samuelson is also concerned with proposals to reduce aid to local governments. "Phasing it down I think is definitely the way to do it, rather than just chopping it off," she said.

New Brighton Mayor Steve Larson said he hopes Samuelson and other legislators will find a way to let residents determine the level of services they want from their government. "Char was always a person concerned with the rights of citizens," Larson said.

In her free time, Samuelson enjoys staying active. During the winter months, she enjoys bowling, and in good weather she walks and plays golf. "I'm a horrible, horrible golfer. But I do it anyway," she said.

Most of all, Samuelson and her husband, Gerald, like to travel. She says their favorite destination is the coast of Maine. "We try to go back there as much as possible," she said. "We kind of go back to the same old haunts and do the same things, and just relax."

For now though, the rigors of legislative life occupy her attention full-time. Samuelson says she didn't realize how busy life gets at the Capitol. "You're busy from the time you get here 'til the time you get home. Maybe you can sneak in a lunch or an apple to keep you

going," she said. "But it's productive busy and I think that's real important."

DISTRICT 50B

2002 population: 36,953

Largest City: Fridley

Counties: Anoka, Ramsey

Location: northeastern Twin Cities suburbs

Top Concern: "Health care and community based services, because I think it's very important to have community-based services for our elderly and our disabled."

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