

Contact: (732) 932-9384
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Debbie Walsh, director, ext. 227
Gilda Morales, project manager, information services, ext. 264

WOMEN WIN PROMINENT ROLES IN NJ LEGISLATIVE LEADERSHIP
Oliver Chosen as Assembly Speaker, Buono as Senate Majority Leader

Women will hold two top leadership positions when the New Jersey legislature convenes in January, according to the Center for American Women and Politics, a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

Assemblywoman Sheila Y. Oliver (D-Essex/Passaic) will become Speaker, the first African-American woman to hold that position. Senator Barbara Buono (D-Middlesex) will be the first woman to serve as Senate Majority Leader. The two Garden State leaders will be among only a handful of women in top legislative leadership slots nationally.

Five women currently serve as Speakers of lower houses across the country, and four are Senate Majority Leaders. CAWP provides detailed information about women in state legislative leadership at www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/levels_of_office/documents/leglead.pdf.

"Only a few short years ago, New Jersey's legislature was one of the worst in the nation for women's representation," notes CAWP director Debbie Walsh. "Today, we're one of the top 15 states, and now two experienced women assume key leadership posts. The dramatic improvement reflects vigorous efforts to recruit and train women candidates around the state. With continuing hard work, we can ensure that women are always at the table when policy is shaped, perhaps even leading the discussion."

The first woman Speaker of the New Jersey Assembly was Marian West Higgins (R-Bergen), who served in 1965, only the third woman in the nation to hold that post.

Oliver, an Assembly member since 2004, has been Deputy Speaker Pro Tempore since 2008 and was Assistant Majority Leader in 2006-2007. She previously served on the Essex County Board of Freeholders and the East Orange Board of Education. She will replace Assembly Speaker Joseph J. Roberts, Jr., who has been Speaker for the last four years.

Buono has been a senator since 2001, and before that served in the Assembly after winning a special election in 1994. An attorney, she was the first woman to chair the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee. Before entering the legislature, she was a councilwoman in Metuchen. She will succeed Senator Stephen Sweeney, who will become Senate President.

About CAWP

The Center for American Women and Politics, a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, is a university-based research, education and public service center. Its mission is to promote greater knowledge and understanding about women's changing relationship to politics and government and to enhance women's influence and leadership in public life. CAWP is a leading authority in its field and a respected bridge between the academic and political worlds. CAWP's annual bipartisan New Jersey candidate training program, Ready to Run™, will take place March 19-20, 2010; for information, visit www.cawp.rutgers.edu.

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