

Vice President of the Hamilton County Board of Commissioners speaks on current initiatives.

By Allie Stevens
For JOUR 2311

Denise Driehaus is the current Vice President of the Hamilton County Board of Commissioners (BOCC) in Cincinnati, Ohio. Having graduated from Miami University with a political science degree and a minor in English, she was first elected in 2016 and is in the second of her two four-year-long terms.

She is not only the board's most senior member and was the first woman ever to be elected to the BOCC, but she also became a House Representative for the state of Ohio. Denise has spearheaded many progressive initiatives in the county and looks forward to seeing how her people will benefit from them.

Q: Do you have a favorite college moment that solidified your decision to be a politician?

A: I would say my decision didn't happen while I was in college. However, I had a class I especially enjoyed, which was a simulation class for city politics. Each student played a role: one was the mayor, one was a city manager, another was a council member, and we all had a blast.

My younger brother took the same class, and he became a member of Congress, and I went on to become a state representative and then a county commissioner.

Q: Could you walk through a day of what being VP of the BOCC is like and what some of your duties are?

A: There are three other members of the commission board. I'm VP, so I'm second in line right now. We oversee the budget of the county, which is a big deal because it encompasses so much of the safety services of the county. It's the courts, the jails, the Department of Job and Family Services, and we're also where children's services reside.

We're doing a lot of economic development work as well. We have grants to jurisdictions as they apply for catalytic projects to create economic activity. We're also working on building a convention center district project with



Denise Driehaus speaks with WCPO, a local Cincinnati news organization about launch of Women and Girls Council (cr: Phil Didion)

the city to build a garage in Findlay Market.

Q: What were the actions taken and the thought process behind the decision to add \$2 million to the free store Foodbank?

A: Well, the SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits stopped, and that's controlled at the federal level, so we had no authority over that. But the timing was troubling because of inflation, and some folks are still climbing out of Covid. We agreed that we couldn't make up for SNAP, but what can we do to help the food banks because they now provide food to those who fall behind?

We had \$2 million in our broadband line through the American Rescue Plan Association (ARPA), so we diverted that \$2 million out of that line into the food bank line so that the free store could gear up for what they think is going to be an influx of people.

Q: Being the first woman to be elected to the BOCC, how did knowing you were setting a precedent affect some of your first decisions? Did it add pressure at all?

A: Yes, actually. While campaigning, I talked to many women's groups and got their support. I thought, "Wouldn't it be nice to start a commission for women and girls?" After I was elected, I did just that.

We've advocated for things like pay equity, domestic violence (DV), and having accessible period products for school students—so we moved on to some significant societal issues and have had lots of success. The county did a

pay equity study, and women now earn .98 cents on the dollar to every man, there are free period products in dispensers in all of our buildings, and we have a diverting program that works with domestic violence survivors and aids first responders when dealing with a call involving DV.

Q: Do you have any specific recent accomplishments you're proud of?

A: I'm the Chair of the Addiction Response Coalition, a group that is trying to save lives and get people into treatment and long-term recovery following an overdose. I've been the chair since I got elected, and we've seen numbers in Hamilton County stabilize when it comes to overdose deaths.

For example, Fentanyl is everywhere right now and all over the country. This is nothing to brag about yet due to how many lives we're still losing every year, but in Hamilton County, the trendline surrounding overdose deaths has flattened out, and we might see a decrease from last year.

We're doing different things like quick response teams provided to those who have recently had an overdose to try and get them into treatment, utilizing peer-to-peer mentors to help encourage citizens to seek help.

We're also working on the widespread distribution of Narcan. We pushed hundreds of thousands of kits and even trained individuals on how to use them since there isn't always a first responder around to administer the drug properly.