***Editor’s note:*** This column is provided to Wisconsin Newspaper Association members by WisPolitics.com. Proper attribution to WisPolitics.com is appreciated. Also, please publish the tagline that is included at the end of the column.

**EVERS PRIORITIZING 'DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVITY' AS HE BUILDS HIS STAFF**

Gov. Tony Evers is prioritizing “diversity and inclusivity” as he looks to build a staff capable of taking on some of the biggest challenges facing the state.

And according to his successful campaign manager turned Chief of Staff Maggie Gau, that starts with “empowering and trusting women.”

“He doesn’t just talk the talk; he actually walks it. And I think he empowers women to make decisions,” Gau said at a WisPolitics.com luncheon in Madison on Jan. 29.

For Evers, that means women in positions where their voices can be heard.

A list of personnel provided by the Wisconsin Legislative Council shows that eight staffers, comprising 80 percent of Evers’ internal team — including Gau, her three deputies, the legislative director, the policy director, the director of constituent services and the deputy communications director — are women.

The East Wing of the Capitol has not seen that many female staffers since 2001, when former Gov. Scott McCallum employed nine women on his staff of 17. Evers’ staff appointments also mark a sharp increase from former Govs. Scott Walker and Jim Doyle, who both employed four women at most during their time in office, per staff lists provided by the Legislative Council, though they only list personnel who were in their posts at the start of each biennium.

Evers has also named seven women to cabinet-level positions: Emilie Amundson at the Department of Children and Families; Kathy Blumenfeld at Financial Institutions; Andrea Palm at Health Services; Dawn Crim at Safety and Professional Services; Sara Meaney at Tourism; Mary Kolar at Veterans Affairs; plus Rebecca Valcq at the Public Service Commission.

The increased number of women in positions of power is important to the new administration, because according to Gau, “Who you have in the room affects a lot of the policy decisions that you make.

“If you’re talking about a policy, and everyone in the room looks and sounds the same and are from the same place, guess what? You’re probably going to have very similar answers.”

But Evers isn’t only looking at gender as he tries to build an administration with a variety of viewpoints. Gau said the governor is looking for “diversity across the board.”

Evers nominated three African-Americans to hold positions within his cabinet: Kevin Carr at the Department of Corrections, Preston Cole at the Department of Natural Resources and Dawn Crim at the Department of Safety and Professional Services. He also appointed an African-American woman, Carolyn Stanford Taylor, to succeed him at the Department of Public Instruction. In addition, Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes is African-American.

Factoring in Stanford Taylor — who holds a constitutionally elected office but was appointed by the governor — those figures bring Evers in line with the high-water mark for racial diversity among cabinet appointees during the Walker administration.

And in the quest to “make government a place that’s reflective of the state,” Gau said working across party lines will be a priority for Evers.

“How many Wisconsinites can you go up to and say, ‘Are all of your friends Democrats and are all your friends Republicans?'” she asked. “That’s ridiculous; that’s not how the people are.”

In that spirit, Gau said Evers is looking forward to working with the Legislature, despite what she calls the “unfortunate” direction GOP lawmakers chose by passing legislation during the lame-duck session that stripped the governor and AG of some of the powers their predecessors held.

“We have a two-year session that’s ahead of us, and so we’re going to continue to put our best foot forward to work with them to find solutions,” she said.

Gau described her boss as a pragmatist and a collaborator, someone who will break down walls and work across party lines to “connect the dots,” an Evers mantra that is catching on around the Capitol.

And Gau said Evers is encouraging his cabinet appointees to do the same and is pleased they are quickly following suit by “working across the silos” that department heads can be restrained by.

For example, Gau said the DNR’s Cole and Department of Health Services Secretary Andrea Palm are already collaborating to find solutions to the state’s polluted wells and fulfill Evers’ State of the State pledge to make 2019 the year of clean drinking water.

Gau said the Evers administration plans to use the tactic more broadly to tackle a wide range of issues, including curbing the opioid epidemic and closing the achievement gap in schools.

“It’s about making sure we have a robust public education budget; that’s really important,” Gau said. “But it’s also making sure our kids have good housing. Are they safe at night? Are they going to school hungry?”

Ultimately, Gau said she believes Evers will succeed because of his willingness to empower the people around him to make decisions and provide perspective, regardless of party, race or gender.

“He’s really about making the circle bigger by collaborating, working together, working across agencies to find the solutions that really will make Wisconsin better.”

*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

*Copyright © WisPolitics.com*