

**STATE REPRESENTATIVE  
TONI EDMONDS WALKER, MSW**

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## **Social Work Beginnings**

Toni Edmonds Walker was born on February 17, 1952 in North Carolina. At the age of seven she moved to New Haven, where she has resided for over forty years. Walker was raised in a family of “community investors,” people who were active in the community, both politically and socially (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 5, 2003). She is the daughter of Reverend Dr. Edwin R. Edmonds, a retired minister and political activist, and the late Maye Bailey Edmonds, a former school teacher in the New Haven public school system. She is the youngest of four daughters (State Rep. Toni E. Walker, n.d.).

Representative Walker began her career as a bank marketer in Massachusetts, merging banks for what is now Fleet Bank. This was a lucrative position that she enjoyed and had held for about fifteen years, until she reached a turning point. While merging two banks in Cape Cod, the president of the smaller bank, whose job was being taken over, said to her, “How can you do a job that puts people out of work?” This was when she realized that she could no longer work in this field (State Rep. Toni E. Walker, n.d.; T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 5, 2003).

Representative Walker moved back to Connecticut soon after this, and began working as a fundraiser for the Dixwell Children’s Creative Arts Center, an inner-city program for arts and music, where she later became director (Toni E. Walker, n.d., & T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 5, 2003). A friend who was a social worker and professor at Southern Connecticut State University encouraged her to pursue social work, so she enrolled at SCSU where she

received a Bachelor of Social Work. After completing a BSW, she received a Master of Social Work from Fordham University in New York. Although she initially began her studies with a concentration in clinical social work, she soon changed her major when realized that the work she intended to do required an administrative focus.

### **Introduction to Politics**

Walker found joy in helping people to become empowered, but became frustrated with the laws that were counterproductive to empowerment. As time went on, she discovered that laws and policies were consistently the roadblocks that prevented people from being reaching their full potential. After the representative from her district passed away, she found various community groups and unions urging her to run for state representative (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

Initially she, like many other politicians, did not think she was qualified for the position. However, she states that this was not necessarily a disadvantage, as too much confidence is a weakness. For her, the hardest part of campaigning was going door to door, as she was terrified of rejection. She also stated that, as a social worker, she tended to be long-winded. She once went to an elderly woman's house while campaigning, and wound up having lunch with her and looking through old photo albums with her. After this, her campaign manager did not allow her to canvass alone, and limited her to five minutes per house (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

In the beginning, Rep. Walker had difficulty speaking to large groups. However, she has been able to overcome this with time. She also realized that, as a community activist and an administrator, she never used the word “I,” as she found it too self-centered and egotistical. She always used “we,” in order to be more inclusive of the community and her staff. However, as a politician, she learned that she is expected to say “I will do this for you.” Regardless, she continues to use “we” to remind the community that she is not separate from them (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

Walker found that, as a social worker, she understood the laws and the gaps that existed; she strongly believes that politics and social work “go hand in hand.” Because Walker had not held any elected position prior to becoming state representative, she certainly faced some challenges, especially in the beginning. She stated that “it was a hard learning curve”. It was the joke at the Capitol that she “read everything that came across her desk because she was a freshman legislator” (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 5, 2003).

Walker’s father has been her mentor since the beginning of her political career. He has been active in politics for many years, as an originator of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in the 1950’s, the head of the New Haven Board of Education for twenty years, and the advisor to many of New Haven’s mayors. He continues to advise her when he can, as politics is a foreign arena for her. As a social worker, it is difficult for Walker to understand how people do not always make decisions that are morally correct. She has had to learn what is necessary to move people to support her issues

and to get them on her side. She has also had difficulty not personalizing situations when people do not support her. If one takes such things too personally, it develops into a vendetta. With her father's help she has come to understand that the "I'll get you if you don't support me" attitude is the wrong one to have (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

### **Social Work and Politics**

Walker reports that, in certain respects, social work has served as a barrier in politics. Government has many different facets, and Walker found that she tended to gravitate toward those that she understood best and in which she was the strongest. For example, she wanted to be on the Human Services Committee, since this is an area with which she is very familiar. She understood the bureaucracy that is inevitable in providing human services, as most of her clients were involved in the welfare system. However, she realized that she needed to have a more eclectic approach in order to better understand how government functions. She had not been focusing on how to create revenue, which is necessary to maintain social service programs. She describes learning about revenue and taxes as being "the hard part" (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

Despite the difficulty of learning about the financial aspect of government, she had to do her homework in order to fight against the many politicians who want to cut social services. Walker has had to learn a great deal about their positions and "where they're coming from," in order to respond to them regarding

cutting services. She believes that the United States government was developed in order to help citizens thrive in their communities, and that all citizens must invest in it to maintain that perspective. In addition to this, Walker also had to study revenue development and learn how divisions such as the Department of Public Works are entwined in the government (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

Rep. Walker has found that, as a woman, she has no difficulty in finding an audience for her issues. She states that this has become easier in the short time she has been in office. In the federal level of government, she believes it is much more difficult for both women and people of color to be taken seriously. However, at the state level she sees no separation of gender or race/ethnicity (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

Walker believes that there needs to be more social workers involved in politics. She states that social workers “move masses, tend to be logical,” and provide a reality check for other politicians, who are increasingly trained in business and law. Other legislators have difficulty predicting the effects that certain legislation may have on society, and often have rigid, black-and-white thinking, which is counterproductive. Social workers, on the other hand, are more inclined to understand the outcomes; more social workers in politics would mean fighting less of these battles (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

In order to become more influential, Walker believes that social workers need to organize themselves better, and, most importantly, stay in touch with

their legislators. They need to understand that they represent large bodies, and should act accordingly. She recounted an incident that exemplifies the power that social workers wield at the Capitol. In 2002, many social workers testified to support legislation that would allow them to be more involved in schools. However, in 2003, none went to testify against certification for social workers in schools, a bill that Walker had to kill herself. Other legislators assumed that this bill was not important, since no social workers stepped up to do anything about it (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003). Instances such as this one are sobering reminders of the necessity to maintain contact with legislators regarding bills that affect the profession.

Rep. Walker insists that social workers, as well as all citizens, must constantly stay in touch with their legislators. It is not enough to call once regarding an issue; it should not be a “one shot deal.” It is important to call them over and over about the same issue. Social workers must remind them consistently about their interests and focuses, and the need to make a commitment to families and to the community. Businesses and unions do this, and so should social workers (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

Constituents should insist that legislators provide a firm answer as to where they stand on issues. Just as they ask people outright whether or not they will vote for them, they must not be allowed to skirt around issues. Also, it is important to thank legislators when they do support bills that are important to

social work, to let them know that their work is appreciated and recognized (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

Rep. Walker receives approximately fifty to seventy-five contacts per day, which she estimates is more than most legislators. She states that she is very vocal and expressive, and makes a great effort to listen to people. She calls herself “the state representative for all of Connecticut,” since people from around the state contact her. She described an email message that she received from a fourth grade girl living in Cheshire. The young girl wrote, “Please help the homeless. All homeless people need a home like me.” She said that she is trying to arrange a visit to the girl’s school in order to thank her for the letter. Although it is difficult, she tries to respond to everyone who contacts her, because it is important to not walk away from constituents (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

Walker, like many other social workers, wants to push the profession toward a more social justice-oriented model. She strongly believes in the pyramid theory, and states that social workers like her must each reach out to five more social workers. She says that social workers have a responsibility to their clients and colleagues to get involved in the political process, and also to be mentors to each other. Again, she sees this with other professions, and social work needs to follow suit (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

When asked about what she sees for the future of social work, Walker states that “we better get moving and get organized,” to prevent social services from being relegated to the bottom of the list of priorities. Social workers cannot

allow society to continue in the direction in which it is headed, especially in light of the current administration, which is trying to eliminate the programs and ideals that the profession holds dear. If this occurs, social work will no longer be considered a valid profession (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

For anyone interested in becoming a legislator, Rep. Walker advises first being elected to city or town councils. Although she did not hold an elected office before becoming state representative, she believes that it is helpful to do so before running for a state office. While politics are different at the state level, it is beneficial to first have an understanding of how government works on a smaller scale.

### **Issues and Bills**

Currently, child care programs and programs for seniors have been put “on the back burner.” In order to prevent this situation from worsening, Rep. Walker believes that social workers need to collaborate with AARP, the National Council on Children, and teachers’ organizations. The status of these populations must be elevated along with social work; otherwise, “we will kill ourselves” (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

The disappearance of Medicaid is an issue that Rep. Walker has been working hard to prevent. The current administration’s desire to eliminate these programs has a major impact on families and communities, and social workers must determine how best to counteract it. Privatization of programs has been

gradually destroying it, as well as the idea that it can be administered by states. Although she does not tend toward socialist views, Walker believes that socialized healthcare is necessary for this country. Otherwise, there will be more and more poor people with shorter life spans, dying younger because of lack of medical coverage (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

Rep. Walker states that she has been focusing on maintaining existing services and fighting for issues this year. She organized against the budget that was recently passed, and has been focusing on budget bills, about which she has learned a great deal in recent months (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003). Although she states that she has not pushed through many bills, she has introduced forty-four since the beginning of 2003.

Most of these bills are concerned with social services to vulnerable populations (44 Bills Introduced by T.E. Walker, n.d.). Among these are bills for increasing the use of prevention programs as opposed to treatment programs in the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Social Services; expunging the criminal records of those who have made improvements in their lives; protecting those who have property that may be foreclosed; securing funding for AIDS education and prevention and providing housing for persons with AIDS; reporting firearms possession and creating an identification databank; increasing funding for education; creating more efficient special education programs; attracting quality teachers to New Haven public schools; and funding students in alternative to incarceration programs.

Rep. Walker also introduced bills for improving the Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission; restoring voting rights to those no longer on probation; ensuring that children committed to the Department of Children and Families are not placed in numerous residential programs; publicly financing municipal campaigns; assisting cities with funding for housing; providing more funds to hospitals that serve a higher percentage of poor; providing for immigrants' rights; and various bills to assist those applying for Temporary Family Assistance.

Walker has been working to combat reauthorization of welfare. She supported the passage of House Bill 5640: An Act Concerning Work Activities in the Jobs First Program, which will permit temporary family assistance recipients to satisfy work requirements through attainment of a high school diploma (State Rep. T. Walker, Press Releases, n.d.). The bill proposes that a maximum of 20 hours of education be recognized in place of employment. The bill passed by an overwhelming majority in the Human Services Committee and was given a Favorable Change of Reference in March 2002 (An Act Concerning Work Activities, n.d.).

"Education is an undeniable empowerment tool," Rep. Walker said. "By including education as a high priority in this legislation, we make it clear that we are serious about helping women. A promising future can offer the kind of security and independence that only an education can provide. We are helping women to help themselves and I am glad to be a part of that, and very pleased that this initiative is on its way" (Reps. Kirkley-Bey, Walker Support TFA Program, March 26, 2002.)

She has also been fighting to increase the number of extensions one can have for Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF). While the federal limit is 60 months, Connecticut currently has a twenty-one month limit, and in the past allowed four extensions. This was reduced to one, after which Walker and others

fought to increase it to two extensions. At the moment, she is working to secure three extensions. She also fought to have illiteracy recognized as a barrier to employment (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

Walker's Food Stamp Eligibility Bill, which was signed by the governor in May, 2002, makes food stamp programs more accessible to families (Walker Food Stamp Eligibility Bill Advances, April 18, 2002). In July 2001, the Federal Agriculture Appropriations Act allowed states the option of aligning the current food stamp allowances with the less rigid (TANF) rules. Before this, families in Connecticut receiving only food stamps could have a car valuing up to \$4,650 to remain in the program. This bill allows families receiving only food stamps to have cars with a value of \$9,500, which is the TANF guideline.

"We are addressing the needs of families and children." Rep. Walker said. "We hope no child experiences hunger in this state." The bill also allows families to keep their current food stamp benefit for three months after leaving Temporary Family Assistance (TFA). States have the option of supporting working families "transition from welfare to work by guaranteeing a fixed food stamp benefit regardless of fluctuating income" (Walker Food Stamp Eligibility Bill Advances, para. 5, April 18, 2002). Walker also fought against the marriage clause, which states that one must be married in order to receive an increase in cash assistance.

### **Involvement in Committees and Organizations**

Representative Walker is a member of the Education Committee, the Select Committee on Housing, and Vice-Chair of the Human Services Committee at the Capitol (Toni E. Walker, n.d.). Additionally, she is very involved in several organizations in the New Haven community. She is Vice Chair of the New Haven Youth Council of the Regional Workforce Development Board, which works with other youth organizations in seeking to understand how young people can be more successful in the work force (Youth Council, n.d.). Walker is also on the Empower New Haven Education Committee. Empower New Haven, Inc. is an organization that strives to improve the quality of life in six empowerment zones throughout the city; it focuses on business development, workforce development, and home ownership (Empower New Haven, Inc., n.d.).

Rep. Walker is a member of the Women's Leadership Forum Executive Committee. The WLF, which is part of the Democratic National Committee, was founded in 1993 to bring more women into the political arena and to give them a stronger voice within the Democratic Party (Women's Leadership Forum, n.d.). She also chairs the Department of Children and Families Therapeutic Child Care Committee, and is a member of both the Adolescent Parenting Council and the Domestic Violence Task Force of Greater New Haven (Toni E. Walker, n.d.).

In addition to representing the 93<sup>rd</sup> district, Rep. Walker is assistant principal at New Haven Adult Education. There, she writes grants for her programs, as they are not mandatory and do not receive funding from the state. She also develops community programs, including workplace training and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. She is particularly proud of a

program for those graduating from the General Educational Development (GED) program who will be transitioning into college. Walker states that 90% of the students coming into the school had never considered going to college, and fear making this transition. She tries to dispel this fear and help them to understand that they can be successful in college courses (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

In order to do this, she refers them to badly-needed services. While an estimated 4,500 students pass through the school every year, few are connected to community resources. Case managers who are graduates of the program and who take night classes at Gateway Community College reach out to the students, providing them with referrals to services and offering them encouragement. They attend college classes which are taught at the Adult Education campus. This helps prove to tentative students that they can, in fact, succeed. After this they transition into taking classes at the college campus (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 6, 2003).

### **Conclusion**

Representative Toni Edmonds Walker's story is probably typical of many social workers who become politicians. It is inspiring nonetheless, due to the determination that she has shown throughout her initial career as a social work administrator and in her work as a state legislator. While many of us believe that being a politician requires extraordinary skills that few possess, Rep. Walker demonstrates that this simply is not true. Trite as it may sound, all that is

necessary is the desire to change the status quo and the willpower to do it.

While it is certainly a challenge to balance political life, one's personal life, and an additional job, Rep. Walker proves that, not only can it be done, but it can be done without giving up the idealism that brought her into politics.

Representative Walker recounted a story that illustrates the significance of being both a politician and a social worker. Her father, who is ill with Parkinson's disease, had a certified nurse's aid who asked Walker if she remembered her. Slightly embarrassed, she admitted that she did not. The CNA went on to say that she had been in a parent education class that Walker had instructed. Walker had sat down with this woman, a single mother like her, and had been persistent in encouraging her to become certified as a CNA. Now, here she was, living out her dream and caring for Walker's father. The woman was incredibly grateful that someone had given her that encouragement, and gave her an enormous hug. Walker realized then that she had truly touched this woman's life (T.E. Walker, personal communication, May 5, 2003).

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