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Coen's love for Kansas starts with small-town roots

Wichita Business Journal - by [Josh Heck](#)

Because his Kansas roots run too deep for him to be away for a long period of time, Steve Coen knew all along that his stay in the nation's capital would be temporary.

He vowed not to catch "Potomac fever" — the strong pull of working for the U.S. government in Washington D.C. — and that he would remember where he came from.

"I never felt like I would ever stay there," the 55-year-old Coen says. "I always wanted to come back to Kansas. It's just who I am. I wanted to be somewhere where I could make a difference, and I didn't want to make a difference anywhere else. I wanted to make a difference in Kansas."

In September, he was named president and CEO of the Kansas Health Foundation after serving 10 years as its vice president for administration.

Coen, who has been with the foundation since 1987, replaced Marni Vliet who left to start her own counseling firm.

But Coen's desire to serve Kansans predates his tenure with the Kansas Health Foundation. It can be traced to his work with former U.S. Sen. Bob Dole.

While attending law school at [Washburn University](#), Coen secured a congressional internship with Dole that later led to a position on his staff.

During the 1970s and 80s, Coen served as state director of Dole's four Kansas offices and in 1985 became his legislative assistant in Washington D.C. In all, Coen worked eight years for Dole.

During that time, Coen says he saw Dole's passion for wanting to make a difference for Kansas and its people. It didn't take long for Coen to share a similar passion.

"(Dole) just loves the state of Kansas and I think part of that probably rubbed off on me," Coen says.

So when the opportunity to come to work at the Kansas Health Foundation presented itself, Coen couldn't ignore the opportunity.

Set Apart

Whether in politics or his work with the Kansas Health Foundation, those who know Coen say his leadership skills set him apart.

Still, the president and CEO title wasn't given to him because of his tenure with the foundation, says Ron Holt, chair of the [Kansas Health Foundation Board](#) and Sedgwick County's assistant county manager.

Coen still had to compete for the job against a pool of national applicants.

Coen was chosen, Holt says, in part because he shared with the board a similar vision for the foundation in wanting to place a more pronounced emphasis on children's and public health issues.

Another reason was Coen's people skills, Holt says.

"I think it's fair to say that he is very personable and engaging," Holt says.

These traits also are evident in other areas of Coen's life, says Jeff Gannon, senior pastor at Chapel Hill Fellowship United Methodist Church in Wichita.

Coen has been a member there since the church started in 1995.

Gannon says Coen has played a key leadership role in the church from the beginning. His presence, Gannon says, has helped guide the church through a series of transitions, including moving the congregation from [Wichita Collegiate School](#) to its own building that it is now looking to expand.

"He's just been in the whole mix of it all," Gannon says. "Steve is a 21st century leader. That is a distinctive form of leadership."

Rather than merely giving orders, Coen prefers to create buy-in from those he works with. It's a trait Coen says he learned while working for Dole.

"The legacy he left was being a consensus builder," Coen says. "I would hope that I could emulate those traits. I try to do that."

Small Town Roots

Coen's Kansas appreciation goes beyond his work with Dole and the Kansas Health Foundation.

He says it is rooted in his upbringing.

Coen was born in St. John, a town with a population of about 2,000 people. His graduating high school class had 62 students.

It was there, he says he learned the value of hard work.

He did a number of odd jobs growing up such as bagging groceries and loading 100-pound sacks of potatoes onto trucks. He also worked in his father's appliance shop.

And when Coen wasn't working, he likely was involved with a school-oriented activity.

"It really gave you a lot of opportunities to be involved in everything," he says. "You were always busy."

The Steve Coen file

Age: 55.

Title: President and CEO of the Kansas Health Foundation.

Education: Bachelor's degree from [Emporia State University](#) and a law degree from Washburn University.

Experience: 1978-80 — Congressional intern for former Kansas Sen. Bob Dole; 1980-87 — Worked under Dole as state director of Dole's four Kansas offices and in 1985 became his legislative assistant in Washington D.C.; 1987-present — Kansas Health Foundation, where he has served in different capacities including director of public affairs and program officer and more recently as vice president for administration. Promoted to president and CEO in August.

Family: Wife, Monica; children, Jennifer, 17; and Justin, 13.

Hobbies: Reading, working out and traveling.

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