

## POLITICS IN MINNESOTA



Educated as an attorney, Mark Siegel has become a key player in statewide implementation of the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare. (File photo: Peter Bartz-Gallagher)

### Mark Siegel: Refusing to be stopped

By: Kevin Featherly March 21, 2014 0

A first encounter with Mark Siegel, state planning director for the Department of Human Services' health care reform implementation team, can be discomfiting.

Siegel is small — perhaps 75 pounds — and permanently bound to a huge, equipment-laden wheelchair. A caregiver never is more than a few steps away. While he could handle a pencil as a child, today he has extremely limited use of his hands. The ventilator he depends on sometimes pushes out a deep groan that sounds as if he is in terrible pain — though apparently he is not.

Communication can also be difficult on first meeting. Siegel's voice is a thin, quiet, high-pitched tenor. The muscles that control his speech are badly compromised by the spinal muscular atrophy that afflicted him at birth.

He knows quite well how first impressions sometimes keep people at arm's length.

"I think there is general intimidation," he says matter-of-factly. But he also knows how quickly those impressions evaporate as people get to know him.

"It's like anything that you're not familiar with," he says. "The more you're exposed to something, the less a big deal it is."

There is a little more to it than that. The fact is that, when people get to know him, they discover what a truly remarkable a human being he is.

#### **Making life easier**

Educated as an attorney, Siegel, 40, has become a key player in statewide implementation of the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare.

He works under Susan Hammersten, DHS' health care reform implementation manager, on her health care reform implementation team. There Siegel helps draft complex legislation to bring Minnesota's Medical Assistance and MinnesotaCare programs into compliance with Obamacare's byzantine rules.

"Mark is just incredibly intelligent," says Hammersten. "He probably has something akin to a photographic memory, which I'm sure he had to develop because he can't just jot things down — he doesn't have those little cheats."

He has written numerous explanatory papers and met with politicians and their staffs to help them understand the implications of the reforms. He helped draft legislative changes in state eligibility income limits for the state's health care assistance programs that, to cite one example, make some single adults eligible.

"It's like peeling an onion," Hammersten says. "When you start to change something in legislation, it can change your thinking about the way a lot of other things are written. He really did an exhaustive run-through of an awful lot of pages of legislation."

Siegel is quick to point out that, among mid-level bureaucrats in a complex state agency, no one is a superstar. "You play a very small part in changing policy," he says.

His boss won't dispute that. But Siegel was her first hire when she was appointed three years ago to lead state ACA implementation, and she argues that he makes an outsized contribution.

She points to the example of MinnesotaCare. The program must change from the ground up to conform to ACA mandates, she says. One problem is that recipients would either have to sign up for MinnesotaCare on the state online exchange, or the program would have to become a "state basic plan option" as outlined in the ACA. Her team favored the latter approach.

"So that is what we worked on, morphing our old MinnesotaCare program to meet the requirements of this new basic health program," Hammersten says.

One problem: The federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) was late publishing the rules defining what a basic state plan should look like. Deployment was finally delayed to 2015.

But that wasn't known when her team took its proposed changes to the Legislature last year. That was a moment when she says Siegel "really shined," aided by a memory that can cite federal statutes chapter and verse, on the instant.

"Mark basically did the analysis — with some educated guesses about some things," she says. "He took the lead and worked with a lot of people, brought a lot of people in and shepherded that project. He really made my life a lot easier."

He has made life easier for other people, too. Hired by DHS in 2002, he initially worked as an analyst devoted to continuing care for the disabled. Obviously, he knows something about living that life. In fact, despite earning a salary of just under \$80,000, Siegel himself is a Medical Assistance client.

"Yup, I'm a welfare recipient," he says. "My nursing care alone, I sat down and calculated this out — it's \$300,000 a year," he says. "And I'm pretty unusual. Most people with disabilities live at or near the poverty line."

In 2006, Siegel developed a three-year, federally funded DHS demonstration project for the mentally ill to increase access to both health care and employment. Independent analysis by the Lewin Group later declared the project a success.

Participants in "Stay Well, Stay Working," became employed, required less state help and became better integrated into their communities than members of a control group, the analysts said. They also saw significant increase in earnings, had less medical debt and saw greater improvements in their functioning, according the Lewin Group report.

In 2008, Siegel transferred to a job working on eligibility policy for Medical Assistance and MinnesotaCare, particularly children and families. Expertise gained in that role attracted Hammersten's notice when she was putting together her ACA implementation team. By that time, she says, Siegel already was working independently to analyze state's ACA policies.

"A lot of what Mark did at the beginning was very foundational, looking at our programs as they existed and how they were going to have to change," she says. "He continued to do it as part of this job."

Siegel takes little credit for those contributions. "I think I have been involved in some cool things," he says.

## The urban life

When it comes to cool things, Siegel does not shut down when he leaves work. Journalist Adam Wahlberg, who lives in the same downtown Minneapolis high-rise as Siegel, refers to his friend as “a hipster” and “very much the downtown urban guy.”

“He just watches everything, he listens to so much music and he reads 18 newspapers a day,” he adds. “He is a big gamer and a proud one, he blogs about that all the time. He is a gadget guy.”

One such gadget is his iPad. In January, Siegel acquired a toggle switch that lets him control the cursor on the screen by twitching his ear. For the first time, he can use his iPad independently. “That realization is both amazing and a little disorienting,” he wrote on his blog on Jan. 24. One day, he hopes, a chip will be implanted in his head to make it even easier to interface with the world.

Reading Siegel’s blog, *The 19th Floor*, is a good way to understand how little his medical condition impedes his life.

There you’ll find him posting about current events, like the beginning of the “Unsession” (his Feb. 25 entry) or the emergence of a Republican alternative to Obamacare (Jan. 29). He doesn’t exactly hide his staunch progressivism. In the Jan. 29 post he wrote: “Republicans finally got around to releasing a concrete alternative to Obamacare — and it’s kind of awful.”

But he followed that with a trenchant observation that not a lot of other commentators arrived at. The GOP plan, he wrote, does not envision a “pure free-market solution.”

“And it doesn’t take away coverage from everyone who currently has coverage under Obamacare,” Siegel wrote. “To a degree, this plan accepts the status quo and recognizes that we can’t return to the health insurance regime of 2009.”

Despite his health issues, Siegel is no shut-in. In 2004-05 he was a policy fellow with the Humphrey School for Public Affairs and traveled to Washington, D.C., with that group; last October he attended a reunion lunch. And he can be seen monthly at the downtown Minneapolis library, leading the “Everyone’s a Critic” book club, which he founded.

It is a club “for opinionated readers,” formed because Siegel didn’t like book clubs that devolve into “unproductive grumbling” and tend to be anti-literary. That’s no problem with Siegel’s club, which tackled Jane Austen’s “*Pride and Prejudice*” in February. In 2012, WCCO-TV named it one of the “best book clubs to join in the Twin Cities.”

“He consumes and has the ability to retain more knowledge than anyone I have ever met,” says Wahlberg. “The guy has got kind of this Bill Clinton brain.”

That comparison may be apropos — Siegel might harbor some Clintonian ambitions, though perhaps not at the presidential level.

He hopes his DHS role will one day allow him to be more directly involved in decision-making. He doesn’t say whether that means becoming an assistant commissioner, commissioner or elected official, offering only that perhaps one day he could become a manager akin to his boss.

As it happens, Hammersten had an eye on the same thing when she promoted him, she says. His current position gives him wide exposure to people in the agency who might one day be in position to elevate him closer to his goals.

“That doesn’t surprise me at all that that is his goal, and I think he is well suited towards it,” she says. “I hope to try to facilitate that more.”

## THE SIEGEL FILE

**Name:** Mark Siegel

**Job:** State planning director for DHS health care administration

**Age:** 40

**Grew up in:** Green Bay, Wis.

**Lives in:** Downtown Minneapolis

**Family:** Single

**Education:** B.A., English and political science, St. Norbert College, De Pere, Wis.; J.D., University of Minnesota School of Law.

**Hobbies:** Blogger, gamer, founder of Minneapolis' "Everyone's a Critic" book club.

**Random fact:** Siegel once sold a short story to a small literary magazine and has an incomplete coming-of-age novel tucked away in a drawer somewhere. "I based a lot of it just my own experience," he says. "Someday I will return to it."

---

**Tagged with:** AFFORDABLE CARE ACT CENTERS FOR MEDICARE AND MEDICAID SERVICES DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES LEWIN GROUP MARK SIEGEL MEDICAID  
MEDICAL ASSISTANCE MEDICARE MINNESOTACARE MINNESOTA'S MEDICAL ASSISTANCE OBAMACARE UNSESSION

