

**Legislator’s Biographies**

**Representative Rick Lopes**

**24th District, New Britain**

**Rick Lopes** was elected to represent New Britain’s 24th Assembly district in 2012. Prior to that, in 1994, he served as a community organizer in the Broad Street neighborhood. Starting as the staff for the Broad Street Collaborative, a group of residents and business owners, Rick was instrumental in transforming the Broad Street group into the state’s first Neighborhood Revitalization Zone (NRZ).

After the successful organizing career, Rick went on to a position as a housing coordinator at the Middletown Chapter of the American Red Cross and then as a vocational counselor at the Chrysalis Center in Hartford, an agency offering employment support to adults with mental illness. Rick also worked at the State Capitol from 2003-2011 as the legislative aide for Sen. Don DeFronzo who chaired the Government Administration and Elections Committee and the Transportation Committee. Rick also worked as project manager for the Department of Administrative Services.

Since 1993, Rick has run a small property management and maintenance business that operates in West Hartford, New Britain and Hartford.

Rick has a bachelor’s degree in English literature and bachelor’s degree in Sociology from UConn. In addition, he has a Masters Degree in Social Work (MSW) from UConn.

Rick began his political career by running his own successful campaign for New Britain City Council in 2003 (while an MSW student at UConn).

**Representative Cristin McCarthy Vahey**

**133rd District, Fairfield**

State Representative Cristin McCarthy Vahey represents Fairfield's 133rd Assembly District. She is House Chair of the Planning and Development Committee.

As both a legislator and a parent, Cristin is committed to ensuring children have access to a high quality public education. She has pioneered legation addressing how third parties can use student data, protecting student privacy.

Cristin is a member of the permanent Commission on Economic Competitiveness, which analyzes the implications of state tax policy on business and industry in order to develop policy recommendations that promote economic growth and prosperity in the state.

A social worker, Cristin previously worked with Casey Family Services to help older youths in foster care achieve permanence through adoption. She also served as co-chair of the Fairfield Cares Community Coalition, which works to prevent suicide and substance abuse among teens.

Educated at the University of Notre Dame and the University of Washington, She and her husband, Brian share the joy of raising three children, all of whom attend or have been through Fairfield Public Schools.

**Representative Pat Wilson Pheanious 53rd District Tolland, Willington and Ashford**

A native of The Quiet Corner, State Representative Pat Wilson Pheanious was born in Willimantic and moved to Ashford when she was 5. Following graduation from E. O. Smith in 1968, Representative Wilson Pheanious earned a bachelor’s degree in English literature from the University of Connecticut (UConn). Representative Wilson Pheanious attended two graduate schools at UConn at the same time earning a Master’s Degree in Social Work (MSW) and Juris Doctor (JD) in 1981. With the completion of her law degree, Representative Wilson Pheanious was admitted to the Connecticut Bar in Windham County that same year.

State Representative Pat Wilson Pheanious would then go on to found and direct the Center for Child Welfare Studies and taught at the University of Saint Joseph (then Saint Joseph’s College) for 7 years. She was tenured at the rank of Associate Professor of Social Work. For an additional 10 years, Representative Wilson Pheanious served as a trustee at the university. Throughout the representative’s career, she has continued to teach adjunct classes at University of Saint Joseph, Eastern Connecticut State University, and Southern Connecticut State University in addition to summer programs at UConn.

Following her roles at the University of Saint Joseph, Representative Wilson Pheanious moved to the Department of Children and Youth Services (now Department of Children and Families (DCF)) where she served for three years as the Statewide Director of Protective Services. While at DCF, Representative Wilson Pheanious served a representative to the state in settling the case of Juan F. v. O’Neil. During the case, Representative Wilson Pheanious helped to write the Juan F. Consent Decree and monitored the federal court judgement over the course of 18 months.

In 1992, State Representative Pat Wilson Pheanious moved to the Department of Income Maintenance (now the Department of Social Services (DSS)) where she served as the Director of Administrative Hearings and Appeals. In 1995, she transitioned into the role of Regional Administrator for Region 4 before becoming DSS Commissioner in 1999, serving until 2007.

After retiring from state service in 2007, the representative moved to Denver, Colorado where she would serve as Director of Human Services for the city and county of Denver for 3 years. Upon returning to Connecticut, Representative Wilson Pheanious served as Interim CEO of a Community Action Agency in Norwalk. She would retire again in 2013 before deciding to run for state office; she was elected to her first term as State Representative for the 53rd Assembly District in 2018.

The daughter of Lt. Col Bertram Wilson, a decorated Tuskegee Airman who fought in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, Representative Wilson Pheanious has tremendous respect and admiration for the women and men who serve for our country. Her father was designated as Ashford Connecticut Home Town Hero in 1985. Through the Guilford Historical Society’s Witness Stone Project, the representative learned that her 5th great grandfather, Sharp Rogers, fought as a free man in the 6th Connecticut Regiment during the Revolutionary War.

Representative Wilson Pheanious raised one son, Cheo Coker, as a single mother. Cheo, a noted screenwriter, now lives with his wife and the representative’s three grandchildren in Seattle. In 2008, the representative married her husband Robert Pheanious.

**Representative Jillian Gilchrest 18th District, West Hartford**

Jillian Gilchrest was elected to represent the 18th District of West Hartford in the Connecticut General Assembly (CGA) in 2018. During her first two years in the Legislature she has championed a number of important issues and has been responsive to her constituents. Jillian feels a sense of urgency to take action and make real change for the people of West Hartford and Connecticut.

Prior to becoming a state representative, Jillian served as the Director of Health Professional Outreach for the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Chair for the State’s Trafficking in Persons Council for the Connecticut General Assembly. Jillian has extensive experience advocating for women’s health and safety, in particular influencing public policy at the CGA.

Jillian has worked as Executive Director of NARAL Pro-Choice Connecticut and Director of Policy & Communications for the Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence. She helped draft Connecticut’s landmark campus sexual assault policy, the first of its kind in the nation. Jillian also successfully lobbied for legislation to establish a system of [paid family and medical leave](https://www.cga.ct.gov/asp/cgabillstatus/cgabillstatus.asp?selBillType=Public+Act&which_year=2019&bill_num=25) in Connecticut. As an advocate she helped lawmakers enact affirmative consent legislation and standards to address and prevent Connecticut’s rape kit back-log.

Jillian was elected to the West Hartford Board of Education in 2013. She holds a Masters Degree in Social Work with a focus in Policy Practice from the University of Connecticut School of Social Work, where she has taught Political Advocacy. Jillian currently teaches for the University of Saint Joseph and Sacred Heart University. Jillian resides with her two children in West Hartford.

**Presenter’s Biographies**

**Kate Robinson**

**Principal, Gallo & Robinson**

**Kate Robinson,** Principal, is an active lobbyist who believes that her clients are the experts in their field.  She works to forge ongoing communication and strong relationships between clients and policy makers so that they can make well informed decisions, and better serve our state and its residents.

After serving as the Clerk of the Planning and Development Committee and running two state-house campaigns, Kate went to work for Betty Gallo & Company in 2000.  Since then, she has worked on dozens of pro-active proposals relating to public health, education, energy security and affordable housing including, but not limited to, CPR in schools, increasing access to Narcan, monitoring access to mental health treatment for people with private insurance, establishing funding for year-round energy assistance, increasing and preserving funds for affordable housing options and housing stability for people facing homelessness, restoration of voting rights for people who have served their sentences in the criminal justice system, and assuring that tenants in public housing can elect the Tenant Commissioner on the Housing Authority if they choose to.

She is proud of her work as part of the lobbying team that passed paid family medical leave, increased the sales age of tobacco and vaping products to 21, CPR in schools, significant gun safety legislation, marriage for same-sex couples, and abolished the death penalty in Connecticut.   She organized the Connecticut Lobbying Conference from 2007 to 2017, and has been presenting workshops at the Conference since 2007.

Kate graduated from New Haven Public Schools (High School in the Community), holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Theater from the University of Connecticut, and earned a master’s degree in Public Policy from Trinity College in Hartford.  Kate is proud to have been honored for an Outstanding Contribution in Arts Advocacy in 2010 by the Connecticut Arts Administrators Association, received the Outstanding Partner Award from the Connecticut Public Housing Network in 2012 and Lifetime Membership in 2013. In 2017, she received a Legislative Champion Award from the Keep the Promise Coalition, and in 2019, she received the Scott Shuler Distinguished Art Advocate Award from the Connecticut Arts Education Association.

Kate became a named partner of Gallo & Robinson in 2014, and Principal of the firm in 2018. She lives in West Hartford with her husband and two sons, and a newish puppy and a hamster.

**Joe Grabarz**

**Lobbyist, Gallo & Robinson**

**Joe Grabarz** served as Chief of Staff for the City of Bridgeport from 1985 to 1988 and then as a State Representative from Bridgeport from 1988-1992 where he was one of the first openly gay State elected officials in the country and the first in Connecticut. As a legislator on the Public Health Committee, member of Act Up and other organizations Joe was instrumental in the fight against HIV pioneering legislation on needle exchange and HIV insurance coverage. He has participated in several world conferences advocating for HIV treatment and a cure. He was appointed to the first Housing Committee of the legislature and was a strong advocate for better state housing policies.

He lobbied numerous city and state legislatures across the country and the US Congress and the Federal Executive branch as Legislative and Policy Director for the Human Rights Campaign Fund and was the first person officially invited to the White House as an openly gay person in the history of the country. He was the Field Director of the national Health Care Reform Project and other reform entities in Washington DC, working very closely with US Senate leaders and the White House during the push for health reform during the Clinton Administration.

Joe led numerous civil rights efforts and lobbied the CT General Assembly as the Executive Director of Connecticut Civil Liberties Union. As the Executive Director of Empire State Pride Agenda Joe led the effort to pass a gay civil rights bill in New York State and establish the country’s first ever LGBTQ Health and Human Services Network. He operated a successful small business evaluating the finances of housing cooperatives and condominiums in New York City.

He joined Gallo & Robinson, LLC (formerly Betty Gallo & Co.) as a lobbyist for the 2007 Legislative Session. In addition to advocating before numerous state legislatures for a variety of civil rights and health issues.

Joe has worked on several film and art projects including “Everything Relative” a film referred to as “The Lesbian Big Chill.” He was a key to the success of Dancers Responding to AIDS Fire Island Dance Festival during its formative years, raising millions of dollars for Broadway Cares and receiving the Bess Shenton Memorial Award for his services. He has also received numerous awards and recognition from other organizations including; The CT Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights, NOW, The New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-violence Project, The CT Psychological Association, CT Coalition for Choice, CT Athletic Trainers Association, CT Optometric Society, The Congress of CT Community Colleges, CT AIDS Consortium. AIDS Ministries of CT, United Way of CT, The Human Rights Campaign Fund, The Community Justice Coalition, Win-PAC, Northeast Citizen Action Center, The Hartford Courant Tapestry Award, The Bridgeport Community Justice Coalition, CT NARAL, CT Coalition for Children, CT Civil Liberties Union.

Joe is a beekeeper who is very concerned about pollinator health and is an advocate for urban beekeeping. He is a glassblower certified by one of the oldest glassblowing furnaces of Murano, Venice Italy.

**Bill Welz**

**Lobbyist, Gallo & Robinson**

**Bill Welz** joined Gallo & Robinson in 2018, after six years serving the Office of Governor Dannel P. Malloy. During that time, he served in a variety of positions, starting as the Executive Aide to the General Counsel, moving up to Senior Associate for Policy and Government Affairs and finally to Director of Policy. With his significant experience navigating the legislative process, he became a problem solver for the administration. He guided gubernatorial appointees through the confirmation process, moved the governor's priorities through the legislature and advised state agencies on policy positions and relations with the legislature.

Bill has been involved with legislation including (but not limited to) pay equity, ban the box, fairness to sexual assault victims, title protection for social workers, nursing home staffing ratios, prosecutorial transparency, and safe storage of firearms. He also has been a successful advocate for increased funding for magnet schools and the American School for the Deaf.

His dedication to the political process is deeply rooted in the Quiet Corner where he proudly served on both of Governor Malloy's campaigns and as Field Director for Congressman Joe Courtney's re-election in 2012. He currently serves as a member of the Judicial Selection Commission as 2nd Congressional District appointee of the Governor.

Bill is a graduate of Eastern Connecticut State University and currently resides in Willington with his wife, Allison, his daughter, Eliza, his son, Grant, and his four-legged friend, Jax.