



Amy Hanauer: Leadership in public policy.



# A Think Tank With A Shaker Edge

BY DIANA SIMEON  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAYDIE HELLER

The Nation magazine named Policy Matters Ohio the most valuable state or regional organization in America. If its executive director has her way, all of Ohio will one day be like Shaker Heights.

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~ Amy Hanauer

When Shaker resident Amy Hanauer arrived in northeast Ohio more than 15 years ago, she was ready for the next chapter in a career she loved.

She'd graduated with a master's degree in public administration from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, then gone to work as a policy analyst for then-Wisconsin state representative, now U.S. congresswoman, Gwendolynne S. Moore. Four years later, she was a senior associate at the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, a progressive policy institute based in Madison.

“So, when we moved here in 1998, I thought I would find the same kind of work,” recalls Hanauer. Hanauer's husband, Mark Cassell, had accepted a teaching position at Kent State University. The family by then included eight-month-old Max.

But the New Jersey native soon discovered that her dream job didn't exist in Northeast Ohio or, for that matter, anywhere else in the state. There just wasn't a research institute that was dedicated to evaluating Ohio's governmental policies through a progressive lens.

“Although there were lots of people doing all kinds of great work in Ohio, there was a gap,” explains Hanauer. “It was 1999 and we were in the longest, strongest economic expansion in recorded history by many people's standards, and yet huge swaths of Ohio were being left out. There really wasn't anybody looking at that and trying to fix it.”

Indeed, despite the boom, more than 10 percent of Ohioans were still living below the federally defined poverty level, while many low- and middle-income working families were also struggling to make ends meet. Yet, Ohio's wealthiest residents were better off than ever before.

So, Hanauer decided, why not set up a think tank-style organization to promote progressive policies that would work for all Ohioans? The timing was certainly right. “There was a huge appetite among a lot of leaders, including some from Shaker, to get something off the ground,” Hanauer says.

That included Shaker resident David Megenhardt, executive director of the United Labor Agency, which in late 1999 awarded Hanauer a grant to research Ohio's worker training policies, in particular how “adult displaced workers could be better reincorporated into the economy,” she explains.

That support allowed Hanauer to officially launch Policy Matters Ohio in early 2000.

### Statewide Impact

Policy Matters Ohio now ranks as a leading public policy research institute, and not just in Ohio.

“It's an organization that has established itself as a voice on the progressive side of the agenda,” says Shaker resident David Bergholz, former executive director of the George Gund Foundation, which provided key early support for Policy Matters. “If there is a story in The New York Times or someplace else around those kinds of issues in this neck of the woods, Policy Matters Ohio is often right up front.”

It has also won numerous awards. In 2009, The Nation magazine named Policy Matters the most valuable state or regional organization in America and, in 2010, the Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations selected it as the most innovative not-for-profit in Ohio.

Policy Matters has offices in Cleveland and Columbus and employs nine people including Hanauer, who is executive director. The others include two more Shaker residents. Well, three actually. Research director Zach Schiller, administrator Sybille Schomerus, a native of Germany and former lawyer, and Schomerus' dog, Gizmo, who accompanies her to work most days. “He loves it,” she says. “In the morning, he runs out the back door to the car.”

Shaker also is well represented on the board of directors. Members include residents David Megenhardt, David Bergholz, and Kamla Lewis, director of the City's Neighborhood Revitalization Department.

The organization's Cleveland office is located in the city's Midtown neighborhood, in a bright, open space on the fourth floor of a former factory. “We've been told that it was

previously used to make submarine parts, but we're not really sure," says Hanauer.

The focus of Policy Matters has expanded well beyond the organization's early emphasis on work and wages, to include education, economic development, the state's revenue and budget, the region's foreclosure crisis, sustainability, and much more. Yet the goal remains the same.

"Our mission is to create a more vibrant, equitable, sustainable, and inclusive Ohio," explains Hanauer. "So, the ideal way it works is that we do the research, then hand it off to a community organizer or labor leader or elected official who will go out and activate the troops and get policies changed. It's not always as clean as that, but that's the vision and it's a vision that for many things has really worked."

For example, early on, Policy Matters staffers took an up-close look at how raising the minimum wage would help Ohio's economy by putting more money in the pockets of the state's lowest-paid workers. The research helped get a proposal to raise the state's minimum wage – from \$5.15 to \$6.85, with further

increases tied to inflation – on the ballot. It passed in 2006, with more than 55 percent of Ohioans voting for the measure. Today, Ohio's minimum wage is \$7.95 an hour.

More recently, Policy Matters played a pivotal role in getting a bill passed by the Ohio General Assembly that makes way for so-called "work sharing" in the state. The legislation, which was signed by Governor John Kasich last summer, lets Ohio's employers reduce employees' hours instead of laying employees off. Those employees are then able to apply for unemployment insurance to get back some of the income for those lost hours of work.

"There are real benefits to this for both employers and employees," says Zack Schiller, who joined Policy Matters in 2000 after a 20-plus year career in journalism, which included 18 years as the Cleveland bureau chief for BusinessWeek magazine and another four years at The Plain Dealer. "We did a report three or four years ago about this, which said that if Ohio had this law in time for the last recession, and if we had the same level of participation as they have in other states, we could have had several thousand people who could have kept their jobs."

This kind of advocacy on behalf of Ohioans, in particular those who don't walk the corridors of power, is key, says Bergholz, who after retiring from the Gund Foundation joined Policy Matters' board of directors. "If there ever was a moment when you needed a voice that was speaking for the working person, this is it. It's a declining force in America, much to my regret, so it's more vital than it's been for decades."

Another major victory for Policy Matters, which also benefited the state's workers: Ohio's advanced energy standard, which says that by 2025, at least 12.5 percent of the electricity generated in the state be from renewable energy sources, such as wind or solar.

"Early on, we realized that there was a lot of opportunity for a state like Ohio if we invested in green technologies," explains Hanauer. "If the United States had more wind turbines and solar panels, a lot more Ohioans could be put to work producing those things." In 2008, Policy Matters worked with then-Governor Ted Strickland to pass the standards and today Ohio is a leader in wind-related manufacturing, with more than 60 facilities in the state. "Unfortunately, those standards are under assault right now," says Hanauer. "But we really feel the economy and the environment can grow together – that there is a smart approach that involves more use of transit, more use of renewable energy, and denser and more vibrant communities."

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## A Home in Shaker

You could say that in some ways, Hanauer is talking about an Ohio that looks more like Shaker Heights, a fact that is not lost on her. "A greater embrace of diversity, public services, great schools, great parks, and mass transit would make this state a better place. Shaker residents understand that," she says.

Hanauer and Cassell made the move to Shaker Heights in 2004 after six years in Cleveland Heights. By then they had a daughter, Katrina.

Hanauer says, "What drew me to Shaker as a community was the fact that it was unequivocal about investing in schools and paying teachers well. Educating the next generation is one of the highest priorities we can have as a society, and that is certainly what made me want to raise my kids in Shaker."

She and her husband were also struck by Shaker's ethnic diversity. "At one point, Katrina did a story for the Onaway Observer where she went around the school and interviewed students about whether they spoke another language at home. There were dozens." That included Hanauer's own home; Cassell is originally from Germany and speaks his native language with the couple's children. Shaker also reminds Hanauer of the New Jersey town where she grew up, and which she partly credits with helping develop her progressive worldview.

"I was raised in an economically diverse community, much like Shaker in that respect, and I remember noticing that a number of elementary school classmates were struggling economically and how unfair that seemed," she recalls. Her mother's career, teaching severely disabled children, many of whom were economically disadvantaged, also had an impact.

"I think I realized early on that we are all interconnected," Hanauer says, "and if you want your community to work for you, you need your community to work for everyone." **SL**