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Gillibrand promises 'real voice'

Democrat takes ceremonial oath of office during crowded ceremony

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HUDSON - Democrat Kirsten Gillibrand took a ceremonial oath of office Tuesday, pledging to be accessible at home in the 20th Congressional District and a champion for reform in Washington.

Several hundred people witnessed Gillibrand's swearing-in at the Columbia County Courthouse. The largest courtroom wasn't big enough to accommodate the crowd, which spilled out into the hallway and down the stairs. U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Roger J. Miner, of the Second Circuit, for whom Gillibrand clerked in 1992 and 1993, administered the oath. On hand were Gillibrand's toddler son, Theo; her husband, Jonathan; her parents and extended-family members, friends and supporters.

As soon as she uttered the final words - "so help me God" - the crowd broke into prolonged cheers and applause. Gillibrand thanked her supporters profusely and promised to provide them with "a real voice in Washington, a voice that listens first and then tries to legislate."

Gillibrand said she plans to hold monthly public forums around the district to hear from constituents and discuss her work. She also hopes to start a program she called "Congress on your block," in which she will hold office hours at a different public location each month.

As for the ambitious agenda for the new Congress' first 100 days set out by incoming House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California, Gillibrand said she is optimistic there will be bipartisan support for some measures - particularly a minimum-wage increase and ethics reform.

Gillibrand, 40, will be formally sworn in as a member of the 110th Congress, along with her fellow freshmen on the House floor, on Thursday. She is the first woman to represent the 200-mile district, which stretches from Poughkeepsie to Lake Placid, and the first Democrat to hold the seat since 1978.

She swept into office riding a national wave of anti-Republican and anti-Iraq war sentiment in a year when Democrats took control of the House, Senate and every statewide office in New York.

Gillibrand defeated four-term incumbent Republican John Sweeney, overcoming a more than 80,000-voter GOP enrollment edge. The contest was known as one of the country's dirtiest congressional races.

Gillibrand said Tuesday she has yet to hear from Sweeney, but his staff has been working with hers to ensure a smooth transition.

She has already hired Rachel McEneny, daughter of Assemblyman John "Jack" McEneny, D-Albany, to be her local communications director; local union leader Mike Russo as her district officer, and Washington County Democratic activist Lisa Manzi to staff her Glens Falls office.

Jess Fassler, a former Ulster County resident who has worked for two Democratic congressmen from Texas - ex-U.S. Rep. Martin Frost and U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett - has signed on as Gillibrand's chief of staff.

The leases on Sweeney's district offices were "not available to us," Gillibrand said, so she will have new locations in Glens Falls, Saratoga Springs and Hudson.

Gillibrand said she plans to end at least one long-standing Republican program in the 20th Congressional District, the Congressional Winter Challenge, which began under Sweeney's predecessor, the late Gerald Solomon.

The challenge was intended to highlight the Olympic facilities in Lake Placid to visiting members of Congress, with an eye toward landing increased federal funding for their upkeep.

But critics - including Assemblyman Richard Brodsky, D-Westchester, who held a hearing earlier this year on the practice - said it had devolved into little more than a junket for Sweeney and his staffers, family members and lobbyist friends.

"I don't think we're going to pursue that," said Gillibrand, who made ethics and reform a focus of her campaign. "I said during the campaign that I didn't think that was the best use of taxpayer money."

Gillibrand also said she has fully severed her ties to Boies Schiller & Flexner, the law firm where she worked until several months ago when she took a leave to devote herself full time to her campaign.

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