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All it took was 300 years

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THE CAMDEN COUNTY community of Haddonfield was founded by a 20-year-old woman in 1701.

Around its 300th anniversary, Tish Colombi became its first female mayor since Elizabeth Haddon sailed over from England.

"Finally, right? It's been a long time coming," said Colombi, an elected official in Haddonfield for 24 years and mayor since 2001.

According to the New Jersey League of Municipalities, 16 percent of New Jersey's 566 municipalities have female mayors, a number that has risen in recent years. Monmouth, Bergen and Camden counties lead the way with 13, nine and eight female mayors respectively, Executive Director Bill Dressel said.

The Center for American Women and Politics, at Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics, ranks New Jersey 11th in the nation, with 30.8 percent of its state legislature comprising female officials. Pennsylvania is 46th; Delaware 24th.

"We're doing a lot better than we did," said Debbie Walsh, the center's director. "That has come from active intervention."

Christine Todd Whitman's election as the state's only female governor in 1994 didn't change the dismal percentage of women in elected office then.

"The system itself had stayed the same," Walsh said. "We were in the bottom 10 at the time."


Walsh said that her center's Ready to Run program, which educates women on how to campaign, deal with the media and raise money, is one of several programs in the Garden State that helped those numbers to rise.

Former Philadelphia TV news anchor Diane Allen, a New Jersey state senator since 1998, says that the biggest hurdle for women interested in office is getting free of the control that county parties have over who runs.

"There's still an old-boys network to a degree," Allen said. "There are a lot of women out there, and I personally feel that you don't have a democracy until the legislative body reflects the population it represents."

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