

A not-so public commissioner of public health

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MARK PAZNIOKAS :: CTMIRROR.ORG

Renée Coleman-Mitchell, commissioner of the public health department, said she's now on the same page with governor about releasing vaccination data.

The state health commissioner's decision to keep private a robust data set detailing school-level vaccination rates in Connecticut, along with her insistence that it's not her job to weigh in on matters of public health, is

rattling some policy makers and provoking questions about her approach to a role that demands input and accessibility.

Commissioner Renée Coleman-Mitchell said recently that she would not release the latest round of school-by-school immunization data, even though she decided last spring to make public the same statistics from a previous year. She pointed to the national measles outbreak as a reason for her earlier disclosure, but said the waning threat meant she could no longer justify disseminating the information.

Gov. Ned Lamont quickly overruled her, calling on the department to release the figures as soon as they were vetted.

As that conflict played out, Coleman-Mitchell made another unusual declaration: She told reporters that it isn't her duty to opine on pending legislation.

"I am not able, nor should I weigh in on anything that's public legislation that comes about as a result of any of the work we do," she said when asked about her reluctance to offer an opinion on vaccine exemptions. "That's not in the purview of my role."

Several lawmakers and the state's previous health commissioner disagree.

"I certainly think the unwillingness to offer her professional expertise on these issues is of concern," said Senate President Pro Tem Martin M. Looney, D-New Haven. "Prior commissioners have embraced their role as experts in offering information and guidance to the General Assembly, which is one of the things we expect of the public health commissioner."

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Senate President Pro Tem Martin Looney

The governor hedged when asked if he agrees with the commissioner’s narrow view of her job, especially her refusal to advise lawmakers on public-health legislation.

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“I think I’ve got to talk to her,” he said. “I’m still getting to know her, getting to know the job a bit. But I need her leadership on public health issues.”

Looney is one of four Democratic leaders who in June sent Coleman-Mitchell a letter seeking her input on whether legislators should move to repeal Connecticut’s religious exemption from vaccines. Data show the number of students claiming the exemption rose by 25 percent between the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years – the largest single-year increase since the department began tracking the information a decade ago.

More than two months after their letter went out, the Democrats are still awaiting an answer.

Looney took issue with the amount of time that had elapsed. Asked if he considered the department to be responsive, he replied: “Well, obviously not.”

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Raul Pino, who served as state health commissioner from 2016 to last April when Coleman-Mitchell took over, said it’s essential for the department head to be vocal on legislative issues linked to public health.

“The role is to advise,” he said. “She should have an opinion and be clear on matters of public health. The commissioner is the top authority. She has the top expertise and she can advise everyone on what is best for the state.”

Pino said the position also requires transparency.

“My advice to any commissioner is that we should be as transparent as possible so the public can have all the information that it needs to make an informed decision,” he said.



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Dr. Raul Pino

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Coleman-Mitchell insists she has and will continue to provide lawmakers with “the science and the facts” on health matters, but she brushed aside questions about whether she intends to offer an opinion on issues such as vaccine exemptions.

In a telephone interview with the CT Mirror, she also would not address the clash with Lamont. In a departure from her previous remarks, she now says she always intended to release the school-level data.

The commissioner issued a statement two weeks ago saying she would not disclose the figures and reiterated that position to reporters in person the next day. But asked recently about her decision to keep the data under wraps, Coleman-Mitchell said she had planned on releasing it at a later time.

“There really wasn’t any hesitation,” she said. “You know, we’ve been asked a number of times for the data, but recognize the data has to be vetted, meaning it has to be confirmed. So we had to wait for all the information to come in from all of our schools.”

She described herself as being in step with Lamont.

“The governor’s office and the Department of Public Health have had healthy discussions about the release of the data,” Coleman-Mitchell said. “Going forward, we are definitely on board in regard to how we’re going to be releasing that data in the near future.”

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DPH Commissioner Renée Coleman–Mitchell

The dust-up certainly bonded the two offices in another way – since the incident, all media inquiries directed to the health department must now be vetted by Lamont’s office and by a legal team.

For years, the state’s health commissioner has taken a stance on topics before the General Assembly. House Majority Leader Matthew Ritter, D-Hartford, a former co-chair of the legislature’s public health committee, said it’s something he expects of the newest department chief.



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“That is historically not how any commissioner has taken on their role here in Connecticut,” he said of Coleman-Mitchell’s reticence. “There’s no question that previous commissioners and staff members have weighed in on pending legislation. I think the reason is because legislators and the public want to hear from them.”

The commissioner’s voice is influential. Other states that were successful this

year in repealing religious or personal belief exemptions to vaccines – including New York, Maine and Washington – all had the backing of their public health czars.

Republicans in the House and Senate agreed that the commissioner should offer input on pending bills, but some of them praised Coleman-Mitchell's performance so far.

“I think the commissioner and her office have worked with legislators on legislation, having a back-and-forth,” Senate Minority Leader Len Fasano said. “I’m

not sure it’s fair to put a blanket statement out there because I don’t think that’s indicative of the way she operated.”

Asked what legislation she had discussed with Republicans, he replied: “I don’t know exactly, but I do know that she has weighed in on a bunch of matters.”

Coleman-Mitchell did say she is working on a health policy agenda that will be shared with the governor’s office and lawmakers early next year. But she declined to reveal any of her priorities.

“At this time, everything is under review so we don’t have anything ready for release,” she said.

Mark Pazniokas contributed to this story.



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Senate Republican Leader Len Fasano said Coleman-Mitchell has done a good job advising lawmakers.



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