Biden Selects Transgender Doctor as Assistant Health Secretary

Rachel Levine, MD, currently leads Pennsylvania's health department and its response to COVID-19.

January 19, 2021 By Trent Straube

President-elect Joe Biden has picked transgender physician Rachel Levine, MD, to serve as assistant secretary for health at the Department of Health and Human Services. Once confirmed, she will become the highest-ranking transgender official in the U.S. government, The Washington Post reports, adding that she'll also be the first openly transgender federal official confirmed by the Senate.

A pediatrician with degrees from Harvard College and Tulane Medical School, Levine currently serves as Pennsylvania's Secretary of Health and as the state's physician general. Pennsylvania's Republican-controlled senate confirmed her three times for those posts. She has been instrumental in leading the state's response against COVID-19.

Below is a pinned tweet from Levin as Pennsylvania's health secretary; in the short video, she addresses COVID-19:

I urge every Pennsylvanian to download the COVID Alert PA so you can get a notification if you've been in close contact with someone who later tests positive for #COVID19, or anonymously notify other residents if you test positive.

Learn more + download: https://t.co/jPBcIL4Bi1

pic.twitter.com/mRXWMzJCBU

— Dr. Rachel Levine (@SecretaryLevine) October 19, 2020

In her new federal position, Levine will serve under Biden's pick for Secretary of Health, Xavier Becerra, who has been serving as California's attorney general.

"Dr. Rachel Levine will bring the steady leadership and essential expertise we need to get people through this pandemic—no matter their ZIP code, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability—and meet the public health needs of our country in this critical moment and beyond," Biden said in a statement posted on BuildBackBetter.gov. "She is a historic and deeply qualified choice to help lead our administration's health efforts."

Vice President–elect Kamala Harris added: "Dr. Rachel Levine is a remarkable public servant with the knowledge and experience to help us contain this [COVID-19] pandemic and protect and improve the health and well-being of the American people. President-elect Biden and I look forward to working with her to meet the unprecedented challenges facing Americans and rebuild our country in a way that lifts everyone up."

Earlier this month, a group of LGBTQ organizations spearheaded a petition that was to be sent to the Biden-Harris administration requesting that Levine be appointed to the incoming federal health team. The letter praised Levine's experience:

> "As Secretary of Health for the 6th most populous state in the country, Dr. Levine routinely works with the Assistant Secretary of Health's office to build critical bridges between federal and state policies on the pandemic and more. Her election as current President of ASTHO [the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials] is a clear testament to the level of faith other public health leaders have in her leadership. To have a former state Secretary of Health in the [assistant secretary of health] position in the coming months, when there is an urgent need for closer alliance between federal and state pandemic policies, will be invaluable.
>
> "We are confident that Dr. Levine is one of the best possible candidates to serve as Assistant Secretary for Health in this time of extraordinary demands on our public health system. She would also make an excellent Assistant Secretary of Mental Health and Substance Use. We strongly urge you to appoint her."

As the Washington Post noted, Levine's gender identity was not always well received by the general public, especially once she became a prominent figure during the COVID-19 pandemic. But Pennsylvania's governor, Tom Wolf, a Democrat, addressed the "hate targeting transgender

Pennsylvanians" by issuing a statement that read in part:

> "The COVID-19 pandemic has brought hate and transphobia into the spotlight through relentless comments and slurs directed at Secretary of Health Dr. Rachel Levine, who is a highly skilled, valued, and capable member of my administration and Transgender....
>
> "Dr. Levine is a distinguished and accomplished public servant. She is committed to keeping Pennsylvanians safe and healthy, even those who direct hate-fueled attacks at her. I'm proud of the work she has done in her five years serving Pennsylvanians, and her success at leading our commonwealth during the COVID-19 crisis is a testament to her intelligence and work ethic.
>
> "Hate has no place in Pennsylvania, even in the smallest transphobic joke, action or social media post. I'm calling upon all Pennsylvanians to speak out against hateful comments and acts, including the transphobia directed at Dr. Levine and all Transgender people in our great commonwealth."

To read about other Biden picks to lead the nation's health team, see "Faces of Hope: Biden Names Infectious Disease Expert Rochelle Walensky to Lead CDC," "David Kessler, Former FDA Leader with HIV Background, to Spearhead COVID-19 Efforts" and the AIDS United policy blog post "How Will Biden's Administration Picks Impact HIV Policy?"

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