Rachel Levine, MD, Will Make History, and a Difference

President Biden's nominee for assistant secretary of health will become the highest-ranking transgender official in the U.S. government.

February 8, 2021 By Sean Strub

This opinion is coauthored by Adrian Shanker and Sean Strub.

Those of us in Pennsylvania have really gotten to know our state's Secretary of Health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rachel Levine, MD, has been the face of Pennsylvania's pandemic response and has provided the calm and clear leadership our community has needed. She is also a transgender woman who was targeted by the hateful and ignorant, and even by some elected officials, with virulent transphobic attacks. She responded with the same calm and clear leadership to the bullies as she did to the virus.

Dr. Levine made history in Pennsylvania as the first transgender person to serve in a state cabinet position, and she is poised to make history again when the Senate confirms her to serve as President Biden's nominee for Assistant Secretary of Health.

Dr. Levine is a pediatrician who ran the pediatric department of one of the largest hospitals in the country. She is a fellow of the Academy of Pediatrics, a professor at the Pennsylvania State College of Medicine and served as Physician General before she was confirmed, with overwhelming bipartisan support, as Pennsylvania's Secretary of Health. A thoughtful leader who is respected by her peers, she was elected President of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials. Her efforts spearheading the response to Pennsylvania's opioid dpidemic have led to a reduction of deaths from opioids and created a model that has been emulated across the nation.

And her leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic has saved thousands of Pennsylvania lives. A 2020 study from Drexel University showed that through the decisions she made, 7,000 lives were saved in Philadelphia alone.

If our nation is fortunate enough to experience her leadership as President Biden's Assistant Secretary of Health, we will have a transgender woman overseeing the Office of Infectious Disease and HIV/AIDS Policy. Dr. Levine wasn't nominated for this position to make history, she was nominated to make a difference. And her oversight over the nation's HIV/AIDS policy will certainly make a difference.

In Pennsylvania, Dr. Levine incorporated data collection efforts that, for the first time, counted LGBT people in public health data. She approved a statewide sexual health guidance to help Pennsylvanians make risk aware decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic. She approved prioritizing people living with HIV, and others with compromised immune systems, in the state's vaccine distribution plan. Dr. Levine is a public health leader who understands the unique challenges facing LGBT people and people living with HIV and she is ready to go to work in Washington for the American people.

In order for her to do so she needs to receive Senate confirmation, and the U.S. Senate has never confirmed a transgender person before. Dr. Levine knows how to stand up to transphobia, but with so much on the line for public health in 2021, we need to enthusiastically push the Senate to confirm this imminently qualified public health expert to make history, and a difference, Assistant Secretary of Health.

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