

1 STATEMENT OF DELEGATE BARBARA EVANS FLEISCHAUER  
ABOUT THE FORCED RESIGNATION OF DR. CATHY SLEMP

June 25, 2020

I am extremely disappointed that WV Governor Jim Justice decided, in effect, to fire our highest public health official, right in the middle of a pandemic.

The Governor's office issued a statement late yesterday, indicating that he told Department of Health and Human Resources Secretary Bill Crouch he lacked confidence in the leadership of Dr. Cathy Slemp, who has been West Virginia's Commissioner of the Bureau of Public Health (BPH) and state health officer, "due to a series of recent issues under her direct control." Crouch asked for, and received her immediate resignation.

Although I've been mainly pleased by how the Governor and his team have handled the COVID-19 epidemic, I cannot agree that the numbers discrepancy relating to Huttonsville Prison is a matter that was under Dr. Slemp's "direct control." Neither the timing nor the wisdom of this decision makes any sense to me, since I know Dr. Slemp to be an incredibly well-trained (Duke University), reliable and compassionate health leader. In my view, her performance has been stellar, especially given the financial constraints that public health has been working under for years.

I am the longest serving member of the House of Delegates Health and Human Resources Committee. Here are some of the facts I've learned in my 24 years serving on the committee:

- During the 2009 H1N1 epidemic, there were approximately 850 local public health employees, now there are under 400, less than half.
- In 2016, the budget for the WV Bureau for Public Health was cut by four million dollars or approximately 25%, instead of preparing for the next, predictable epidemic.
- That cut lasted for three years. In 2019, \$1.5 million was restored to the public health budget, and that amount was continued in 2020; according to my calculations that is a reduced investment of \$17 million over five years.
- As I understand the incident which prompted the Governor's action, data was shared from corrections to the Randolph County Health Department, which then, because of incompatible and archaic software and hardware (due to years of cuts), had to manually enter the data from the prison.

- All of the local health departments have different methods of funding. Under our Code, they are not controlled by the Bureau of Public Health, but rather by local boards. They receive differing amounts of federal, state, county, city, and levy funding, plus fees and grants. Under our hybrid system, the head of the BPH cannot simply order local health departments to do her or his bidding.

West Virginia has the lowest number of female state legislators in our entire country - just 13.4%. During the daily briefings, it gave me comfort to see one face that looked like mine, knowing that women make up more than half of our population.

Instead of getting rid of a valuable team player over a relatively minor issue, what the Justice administration should be doing is working with the Legislature on improving public health policy, resources, and infrastructure for the future. At the very least, the budgets of the BPH and local health departments should be dramatically increased so that we are better able to handle the coming surge and the next pandemic.

According to a report on June 12, 2020 by Kaiser Health News and the AP, at least 27 state and local health leaders have resigned, retired or been fired since April across 13 states nationwide.“ Sadly, now there is one more. Blaming things on Dr. Slemp is not leadership in a time when the numbers of infections are increasing.

And who will lead the agency now? And how will decisions be made on the \$1.5 billion West Virginia has received in pandemic funding?

There are three branches of government, and two of them, under our state constitution, handle policy and appropriations - the Legislature and the Governor. Instead of just one branch unilaterally making all policy and appropriations decisions, it is past time for all hands to be on deck. Clearly, in order to appropriate these needed funds and fix our broken public health system, the Governor should call the Legislature into special session, and he should name a new public health leader. The Senate needs to quickly confirm this person, and the House and Senate need to be at work in Charleston taking up these extremely important policy and budgetary matters.

I will miss the valuable contributions of Dr. Cathy Slemp. She did not deserve this treatment.